

Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic

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SUMMARY

Photography has been a significant medium for the re-reading of post-industrial landscapes. Photographs do not only interpret; they also implicitly define what we value in the landscape, and thus shape what we see. This paper considers the role of photography in conceptualizing the deindustrialized landscape – whether by playing to existing landscape conventions, especially the sublime – or by overtly challenging them. The discussion centers on a photographic tradition based on ordinary rather than extraordinary landscapes, focusing on the 1975 photography exhibit entitled “The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape”. The exhibit challenged romantic conventions in landscape photography and notions of sublime nature by offering up a new concept of “man-altered landscape.” It focused on sites of the everyday, vernacular and industrial buildings, with 168 works by ten photographers, including Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel Jr. These included seemingly flat, banal subjects: gas stations, motels, industrial parks, tract housing, as part of a new interest in the cultural dimension of the vernacular landscape. The following discussion will analyze the conception of landscape as represented in the images of the New Topographics, and relate it to the ways in which post-industrial sites were transformed in the decades that followed, using the design of Duisburg Nord, by Latz+Partner (1990–2002), as a case study.

Introduction

The “imprint of the photographic... continues to be primordial for our visual experience of the city.”¹

So argues Ignacio de Sola Morales in the opening of his well-known 1995 article, “Terrain Vague”. The photographs of John Davies, Manolo Laguillo and others, he writes, captured the qualities of a new category of urban space – the abandoned, interstitial “wastelands” of the modern city, the vague terrain of “void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation”.² The photos brought this ubiquitous urban spatial condition into conceptual focus, and presaged a new way of thinking about the city. Photographs do not only interpret; they also implicitly define what we value in the landscape, and thus shape what we see. Photography has been a significant medium for the re-reading of post-industrial landscapes, instigating key shifts in the design aesthetics that have shaped the regeneration of these landscapes. As Susan Sontag noted, “photography has served to enlarge vastly our notion of what is aesthetically pleasing.”³

In some cases, the power of the photographic image to shape a new aesthetic has been used strategically for overtly political ends, such as in the struggle to save the High Line from demolition. One of the first steps taken by the Friends of the High Line to build a community movement was to commission a set of photographs of the site. As anticipated, Joel Sternfeld’s revelatory images of the High Line’s wild landscape mesmerized the public (Fig. 1). They gave access to what had been an invisible place and provided the decaying structure with a new visual narrative. The images made it possible to reimagine the High Line as an urban space, and played a key role in galvanizing support for the project.⁴

This paper considers the role of photography in conceptualizing the deindustrialized landscape – whether by playing to existing landscape conventions, especially the sublime – or by overtly challenging them. The dominant approach has focused on the “ruin”, drawing on the tradition of the sublime

and its variant, the technological sublime. The discussion centers on an alternative photographic tradition based on ordinary rather than extraordinary landscapes, focusing on the 1975 photography exhibit entitled “The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape”. The exhibit challenged romantic conventions in landscape photography and notions of sublime nature by offering a new concept of “man-altered landscape”. These were not images of timeless nature that transcend history, but a record of “landscapes as humanly organized spaces that are historical and dynamic rather than primordial and timeless.”⁵ This aesthetic was nurtured by a growing interest in vernacular architecture and landscape in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ The following discussion will analyze the conception of landscape represented in the images of the New Topographics and relate it to the ways in which the post-industrial sites were transformed in the decades that followed.

The Iconography of Decay: Ruins, “Ruin Porn” and the Sublime

The aesthetic of the sublime, as theorized in the eighteenth century by Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, William Gilpin, and others, celebrated the experience of the divine and sense of the infinite inspired by extraordinary and terrifying natural landscapes – the rocky mountain tops, rushing waterfalls, or deep chasms that, by virtue of their immensity, power, and grandeur, would arouse deep emotions of wonder mixed with terror.⁷ Though originally invoked by natural settings, the sublime was later expanded to include the constructed landscape in what became known as the “technological” or “industrial sublime”, that, as David Nye describes, “threatened the individual with its sheer scale, its noise, its complexity and the superhuman power of the forces at work.”⁸

The depiction of urban decay as a version of the sublime has gained currency with the growing



Fig. 1: Joel Sternfeld, *The High Line* (photographed in 2011)

popularity of images of the abandoned ruins of Detroit. Some of the best-known works are those of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre in their book of photographs entitled *The Ruins of Detroit*,⁹ as well as Andrew Moore's photographic series, *Detroit Disassembled*.¹⁰ These images of Detroit have been emptied of politics, and instead seek to aestheticize the imagery of poverty and abandonment, often in sensationalized images. This trend has been referred to derisively as "ruin porn".¹¹ Apocalyptic images of emptiness and picturesque decay have filled the pages of popular magazines such as *Time and Life*, its voyeuristic aspects have been compounded by the touristic project of groups such as *Urban Explorer* which promote ruin tourism, attracting outsiders with no stake or interest in the city. Embedded in this particular iconography of decay is a depoliticized aesthetic that naturalizes the processes and effects of deindustrialization: nature seems to be reclaiming the city (Fig. 2). In an essay that accompanies his photographs, Moore writes: "Detroit has become an open city repopulated by trees, grasses, flowers, moss, and pheasants."¹² His – and others' – images of empty lots reverting to fields, trees sprouting in abandoned buildings, draw upon romantic notions of inevitability. Nature is a pow-

erful, yet external force, existing outside of human life, which reinforces a narrative that eludes urban politics, and strips the city of its history and agency.

These images stand in stark contrast to those in the 1975 exhibit, "The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape", which left many of its viewers puzzled and bored. If the allure of "ruin porn" lies in its sensationalist imagery, the "New Topographics" confounded many with its seemingly flat, banal subjects: gas stations, motels, industrial parks, tract housing. The exhibit was curated by William Jenkins in 1975, assistant curator of 20th century photography at George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, NY. It contained 168 works by ten photographers, including Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel Jr. Although it was not originally well received, it has since achieved a kind of landmark status in the history of photography, and inspired a generation of photographers. In 2009 the exhibit was reassembled in Los Angeles, curated by Edward Robinson, and travelled to nine other venues. The revival of the exhibit almost 35 years later has generated renewed attention and



Fig 2: Andrew Moore, *Birches Growing in Decayed Books*, Detroit Public Library Book Depository

scholarship. The work of these ten photographers did not form a coherent “school”; however, together their work developed a new idiom for the representation of the American landscape that reinvented the genre of landscape photography by challenging its romantic conventions, bringing a radically new framework to the understanding of the contemporary landscape.¹³

The controversial title of the show, “New Topographics: the Man-Altered Landscape” reflected Jenkins’ interest in presenting a new documentary objectivity toward the contemporary landscape – the disinterested eye of the land surveyor, as opposed to the metaphysical poet of nature,¹⁴ challenging the romantic sublime of such photographers as Ansel Adams and Minor White. Its unifying theme was the built environment as a subject in and of itself. The word “topography” was used in its dictionary sense of “the detailed and accurate description of particular place city, town, district state parish or tract of land.” Its subtitle, the “man-altered landscape”, expressed a new interest in the cultural dimension of the vernacular landscape. These images documented the creeping shift from a culture of industrial production to a service-oriented economy and its consumer culture. The images offer up deadpan views of the ordinary, omnipresent elements of the landscape: suburban warehouses, industrial parks, tract houses, parking lots, and mobile homes. Bernd and Hilla Becher were the only Europeans included in the show, and their work strikes a different tone. Their quasi-scientific, typological presentation of industrial structures – the water towers, blast furnaces, gas tanks, mine heads, and grain elevators which they had been photographing systematically since the 1950s – were consistently presented in series, organized in a standardized grid, shot frontally in black and white, and stripped of context. This format emphasized the quality of these structures as “anonymous sculptures”¹⁵. The early work of the Bechers has been credited with inaugurating the field of industrial archaeology in Germany.¹⁶ Just as Sternberg’s photographs brought the High Line into public consciousness, the Bechers’ photographic documentation of the Zollern II/IV colliery in Dortmund-Bovingshausen in the late 1960s also served an activist agenda, using the photographic image to make the case for the structures’ artistic and architectural value. This was one of the first industrial ruins to be preserved as a result of a citizen-led initiative. The coal-mining facility was saved from demolition and eventually opened as the Westphalian Industrial museum.¹⁷

It has been remarked that the Bechers did not truly represent the work in “New Topographics”. Critic Andrew Mead has written: “While [the Bechers] compiled an elegiac inventory of a vanishing industrial world, the other participants looked more at the one supplanting it.”¹⁸ Gohlke, for example, had also completed a series of photographs of grain elevators, but the work he showed in this exhibit was of a different character. Gohlke’s “New Topographics” images survey a range of western landscapes from a strikingly new perspective, organized thematically around “landscape”. These images are both reverent and tongue-in-cheek: one *Landscape, Los Angeles* for example is dominated by a parking lot, with a faint contour of a mountain beyond; a second *Landscape, Los Angeles* depicts the frontal view of a parking lot with a cinderblock planter in the center. While the images purport to document specific landscapes, the images feel both generic and idiosyncratic in their locality or specificity. The tension between this sense of dislocation or placelessness with the vivid immediacy of the landscape is heightened by the ethereal light that seems to bathe the images, along with their intense materiality and texture. Art critic Christopher Knight noted Gohlke’s “ability to coax abundance from little”.¹⁹ The images are a gloss on the contemporary hybrid, “man-altered” character of landscape, and the asphalt, power lines, and billboards that envelop and populate it. Their tone is more ambivalent and less elegiac than that of the Bechers, questioning the ways in which the landscape, as a human construct, is connected to a wider social and cultural system. In one of his many essays, Gohlke describes the questions that animate his work: “What is the web of relationships that one perceives in the visual appearance of things? What particular objects in the landscape – natural or human – give one a sense of that incredibly complex tissue of causality, that makes things look the way they do?”²⁰

This question resonated with the new ways that landscape was being defined within the emerging field of cultural geography, notably in the work of the essayist and lecturer, J.B. Jackson, founder and editor of the journal *Landscape* (1951–1967). Jackson’s influential essays were included in the 2009 “New Topographics” exhibit at the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art, along with other texts, videos and photographs, in order to provide context for the photographs. Jackson was a great observer of the overlooked, everyday spaces of the



Fig. 3: Duisburg Nord entry plaza (Photo by the author)

American landscape. These included elements such as fences, backyards, parking lots, motels, mobile homes; Jackson's essays decoded these ubiquitous sites as sources of myth, symbolic value and cultural meaning. He did not view landscape as a work of art, or as a natural space, or as "scenery", but as "a composition of man-made or man-modified space to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence"²¹. He wrote: "No landscape, vernacular or otherwise, can be comprehended unless we perceive it as an organization of space; unless we ask ourselves, who owns or uses those spaces, how they were created, and how they change."²² Jackson's cultural emphasis challenged purely aesthetic approaches to landscape. All landscapes, however banal or quotidian, were worthy objects of study: "There is really no such thing as a dull landscape or farm or town. . . . A rich and beautiful book is always open before us. We have but to learn to read it."²³

It is this interest in the organization of the landscape and its structure that most significantly characterizes the "New Topographics" photographers, with their emphasis on landscape as a cultural medium, which is understood as part of a larger system. In an interview in 1978, Gohlke described his work in this way: "I think all of us were and are primarily concerned with understanding the things we photograph in their largest relationships to land and culture, and the particularities of social existence."²⁴ In the spirit of J.B. Jackson's writings, Gohlke approached the landscape as a document that could be "read", as a primary source of social and cultural meaning. The "New Topographic" photographers' interest in addressing the complexity of contemporary life as part of a larger system aligned with the emergence of systems theory in the 1960s.²⁵ This systems-based approach claimed that complex phenomena cannot be reduced to their parts, but must be understood according to the relationship among the parts.²⁶ Their images of the everyday landscape brought new subjects into focus – the decidedly unheroic and non-picturesque landscapes of suburban housing, parking lots, highways, all elements that provided "a systems-based methodology that draws attention to the interconnected relationships between aesthetics and lived social experience that earlier modernist formalism had tried to keep distinct from one another."²⁷

This photographic expression of the "manaltered landscape" raises key questions for recent landscape designs of abandoned industrial sites. What is the

role of nature in repurposing and resignifying these sites as new public leisure spaces? The trope of wild nature that appears in Moore's Detroit photographs in which the city is reclaimed by natural processes, has been frequently used by designers to evoke the healing qualities of nature as a regenerative force. In her study of recent reclamation projects in the Ruhr Valley, Kerstin Barndt points out the problematic aspects of this approach, noting that a ruin aesthetic that draws on romantic notions of wild nature and "contrived natural environments" has the effect of naturalizing industrialization, and thus stripping the ruin of its social and historical meaning.²⁸ William Cronon made this point very clearly in his critique of the idea of "wilderness", which he associates with the aesthetic of the sublime; it exists outside of time and represents both an escape from history and a retreat from physical nature into the realm of human spiritual values.²⁹

The "New Topographics" collective redefinition of landscape as a "man-altered" hybrid was one of many parallel experiments that laid the foundation for the development of an alternative framework for representing the industrial landscape. The dualistic vision of man and nature implicit in the aesthetic of the sublime was replaced by the recognition that nature, too, had become a human artifact. These images dissolved the distinctions between the natural and the cultural, training the eye on the strange crossovers and juxtapositions that exist between these realms, and stressing the role of landscape as a window into everyday contemporary culture and social life.

These ideas can be seen in the design of Duisburg Nord, a public park that was developed on the former Thyssen-Meiderich blast furnace plant site from 1990–2002 by the landscape architects Latz+Partner (Fig. 3). Here the design strategy grew out of a post-industrial aesthetic, in which nature is not viewed as "wild", but as inextricably bound up with technology and shaped by social relationships and cultural memory. Latz described his interest in expressing the site's structure or "syntax" through the design of the landscape,³⁰ reflecting a systems approach that runs counter to ideas of the sublime. The design of the park is based upon an analytic, almost archaeological approach that seeks to investigate how the industrial landscape was made, how its various components functioned, and what impact production has had on the shape of the land.³¹ The selective preservation of the site's

infrastructure serves to describe and map the history of industrial processes through their imprint on the land. These are treated as discrete systems, or layers. There is no unitary composition or unfolding narrative as one moves through the park, but rather a synchronic experience of distinct systems: the promenades, the rail park, and the water park, consisting of canals and reservoirs. Each of these sequences is meant to make the existing systems coherent, legible, and usable once again.

Latz suggests a radically different attitude to nature when he claims: “destruction has to be protected so that it isn’t destroyed again by recultivation.” Opportunistic ecologies help to shape the new Duisburg landscape, incorporating the pioneer species and exotic mosses that have taken hold as a result of the site’s extreme disturbance and acid soils (Fig. 4). This approach is in sharp contrast to most approaches to regeneration. Consider the “Sleeping Beauty” proposal by Dieter Kienast for a former mining site at Mechtenberg nearby, developed in 1992. Kienast proposed to create a series of gardens that would be surrounded by tree trunks, preventing public access until the trunks had rotted and fallen down, “allowing the wood to grow undisturbed in this place for the next twenty years ... it will remind us that the Sleeping Beauty eventually awoke, and tall and healthy trees will have

risen from the polluted ground.”³² The design of Duisburg Nord argues against a view of nature as a healing, regenerative force, external to culture and history. The acceptance of disturbance and flux is in direct contrast to the myth of recovery that Sleeping Beauty represents. This acceptance of existing conditions is expressed through the trope of the garden which is used as a motif throughout the park, stressing an ethos of experimentation and a belief in human action. Beyond the garden is the gardener – every garden holds the imprint of the human hand. Rather than attempt to return to a prior state of nature, separate from human life, the garden celebrates the act of making. Latz writes: “I believe that using gardens ... is in fact the only way of understanding a landscape. You have to work with the actual material.”³³

The socially complex and hybrid definition of landscape posited by the photographers of the “*New Topographics*” suggests the ways in which the design of post-industrial landscapes might “resist its own naturalization”³⁴ and “protect destruction” in the way that Latz has suggested. These images of our man-altered landscapes challenge designers to reconsider post-industrial sites – not as primordial, timeless nature, but as landscapes that are inseparable from culture and history.



Fig. 4: Moss garden growing on disturbed acidic soils containing coal tailings in the bunker gardens at Duisburg Nord (Photo by the author)

Image sources

- 1 © Joel Sternfeld
- 2 © Andrew Moore
- 3, 4 Elissa Rosenberg

Notes

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