

Winter Growing Fields: Landscape and Estrangement work-in-progress

“Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed: they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten.”

Augé, M. (1995) *Non-Places, An introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London/NewYork:Verso.

This research is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It is due to be completed and disseminated in the spring of 2008. Through practice-led methodologies the research explores the following series of questions associated with a wholesale shift in land use in the Almeria desert region from wasteland to utilitarianism and agribusiness.

In what ways can conceptual binaries, such as space and enclosure, absence and presence, public and private, inside and outside, past and future, be used as a basis to visually convey experiences of human estrangement with the natural world and landscape?

What are the potential visual narratives of working directly within a specific natural landscape during a period of extreme man-made environmental change?

What visual, psychological, emotional, spiritual and social complexities exist at the borderlands of divergent land use?

What new perceptual interplays and visual vocabulary are enabled through the dual visual approaches of photographic capture of external stimuli 'document' and visual construction and the manipulation of process?

In what ways can cross-disciplinary theories of place, non-place, placelessness and the post landscape interact with, and enrich the search for new liminal spaces and forms?

The research is exploring the aesthetic and conceptual territory between fixed viewpoint, high resolution photography and experiments with materials, sequences and events. Two contrasting approaches to photographic image/meaning are being advanced. The first capitalises on the evidential qualities that the camera affords - photograph as document and a direct conduit to place recognition. The second invites alternative engagement with cultural meaning by approaching material to be reconfigured and tested against other types of data. It explores ideas on the perceptual interplays and new visual vocabulary which might be discovered through synergies of both photographic capture of external stimuli (document) and visual construction and manipulation of process. The work attempts to develop outcomes which express something of the psychological, emotional, spiritual and social complexities associated with land use change and the conversion of unique landscapes for profit. The research involves working in specific locations in the Andalucian countryside centred around the city of Almeria. On one hand the region attracts visitors for its exotic and experiential value - climate, natural landscape, history and heritage, local culture and lifestyle. On the other hand the region signals an adoption of architectural standardisation and the application of sanitised processes around monocultures. Much of what one sees is directly affiliated with the dominant monoculture industries. The city's 'edgelands' extend to such a degree that most villages and towns physically connect through the labyrinth of greenhouses and associated services. The key motivator for change in the landscape is the profitability of modern greenhouse horticulture on an industrial scale. Over a thirty year period the sector has grown to 2.5k ha of land coverage (2001) and is still accelerating. Construction involves the complete eradication of the existing land surface and the building of plastic or glass clad, steel and wire frames. When zones reach saturation the greenhouses are seen as a continuous totality of experience this new man-made city of enclosure is both non-place and placelessness and, therefore, a significant contributory factor in increasing social and personal estrangement. This interfacial space

conforms to Shoard's model (2002) - it is chaotic and raw with little consideration of aesthetics, planning, design or thought about the surrounding landscape. In these spaces the detritus of urban dwelling and factory growing compete with the more natural forces and the creep of nature. The overbearing impression is one of a wholesale commitment to converting land for pure function at cost to the longer term guardianship of the landscape and its resources. The importance of re-connection with the natural world in the context of increased labour and potential stress is also deprioritised.

Gomez Orea (2003) summarizes the effect of a catalogue of unchecked and poorly managed horticultural developments in the region,

'All this has created a characteristic landscape of very poor quality, giving an image of intensity, exhaustion and silting of the land and its resources as well as of an unsustainable form of agriculture.'

Unchecked industrial expansion is not simply a loss of physical matter, but more a loss of historical attachment, identity of place and wider culture. Augé's (1995) concept of space devoid of social or anthropological phenomena has resonance within this research. Sealed growing spaces take the outside to the inside. What was once landscape with socio-historical value is eradicated, public access becomes impossible and only workers can navigate the spaces of the greenhouses. Visitors are signposted off major road systems to key tourist attractions or land becomes sub-sectioned into natural parks or beach locations and golf courses.

Inside the greenhouses, different plastics transmit, diffuse and shade light and obscure any view beyond - a world outside is just discernable, but not distinguishable. In 'The Poetics of Space' Bachelard (1964) reasons,

"The dialectics of here and there has been promoted to the rank of an absolutism according to which these unfortunate adverbs of place are endowed with unsupervised powers of ontological determination." ..." outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of yes and no, which decides everything. Unless one is careful, it is made into a basis of images that govern all thoughts of positive and negative."

Bachelard's case for a more subtle consideration of linguistic polarities of space demarcation enhances what one sees and decides to record. On close inspection evidence of smaller scale synergies between the man made and organic materials can be detected and can feature in the debate. The effect of persistent natural forces of wind and sunlight on synthetic materials denotes a much more dynamic relationship between the outside and inside and the open and the covered. The plastic greenhouses are novel 'liminal spaces' where one is held in a state of transition and indeterminacy - aware of the outside by memory alone and unfamiliar with what this new territory signifies. Instinctive notions of growth dependent on the seasons and natural elements compete with an alternative artificiality.

Augé, Marc. *Non-Places, An introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso London/New York 1995

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon, 1969

Orea, Gomez. *La Horticultura En Almeria*. Institutos de Cajamar 2003

Shoad, Marion. *Edglands within Remaking The Landscape*, Profile Books. 2002