

The Latest Frontier of Urban Pastoral: Post-Industrial Landscapes in American Cities

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...There has to be that interval of neglect, there has to be discontinuity... That is what I mean when I refer to the necessity for ruins... There has to be... an interim of death or rejection before there can be renewal and reform. The old order has to die before there can be a born-again landscape.

J.B. Jackson, "The Necessity for Ruins"¹

DISCONTINUITY

The traumatic effects of economic decline leave a telling trace on the fabric of cities, which becomes all the more relevant given the current attention that recession has focused on the intrinsic relationship of the economic to the social. In particular, the monumental shifts American cities experienced from the 19th C. industrial economy to the 21st C. service economy have all contributed to the current social state and perceptual image of the urban condition. In terms of imageability, the abandoned structures of rustbelt industry leave a highly visible record of the cyclical patterns of capitalism, clearly demonstrating the effects on both social and formal arrangements in the present. Key urban thinkers have pointed to a new grammar of cities, referring to the "lacunas" of vacant land awaiting redevelopment and the "ladders" of inward focused and often isolated patterns of use.² Both infer a challenging void condition within the inner city core. Within this void arises the potential for rebirth as the challenges of a crowded and resource-stretched world seek new avenues to accommodate the promise of prosperity and social stability.

The hollowed-out industrial fabric of cities such as Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo, Chicago, and even New York City exemplify the awaiting potential of the void, a new urban frontier that offers

the possibility of revived economic growth and concentrated urban relationships. The decay of these previously thriving environments directly expresses the impact that global forces can have on local conglomerations as economic power is redistributed in the face of shifting policy and the demands of capital. Through its very decline, such a *terrain vague* evokes the desire of capital's frontier consciousness. Only by the loss of both social viability and economic worth can value once again materialize and drive development. As populations seek denser and less resource-demanding locations in the near future, these post-industrial landscapes will have the potential to shift from abandoned detachment to revived reuse.

Prior to the revival of the post-industrial voids within the ecologies of the 21st C. city, such sites will experience a condition of *urban pastoral*. At this time the frontier consciousness, a spirit of territorial exploration and creative engagement, makes itself present. The pastoral condition will reveal the hidden dimension of the void's future while also challenging its current existing state. This condition offers great potential for the agency of design, allowing creatively-minded individuals to actively engage with the emerging ideation of the image. Expressions of such activity point to the continuing tension between the forces of local agency and the potential intervention of global economic structures within the American city. Just as the industrial city was ravaged as global forces shifted in the past, the 21st century city will pursue a course of creative destruction and revitalization in order to serve the needs and desires of its people within the demands of an excessively burgeoning world. As

this process occurs, the pastoral will give visible presence to the transitional period in which ruins become reused.

FRONTIER CONSCIOUSNESS

The promise and opportunities of a western frontier has been a continual beacon for restless populations throughout American history. At least that is until the historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared its final closure in the last decade of the 19th century.³ In Turner's seminal essay on the closure of the frontier, one can find an articulation of a certain sensibility that has surfaced time and again during the unfolding of the American story. It is a sensibility of continuing hope for a better future and an agitated urge to be productive in the achievement of wealth and status. Whether this sensibility is unique to Americans as a cultural body, or rather to the particular configuration of market-driven economic structures combined with social liberties that the American project most clearly demonstrates, his argument regarding the frontier provides a filter for viewing how Americans have engaged with their land, settled it, and built up its forms into a productive capitalist enterprise that has laid the basis for a collective identity.

The frontier consciousness remains an underlying impulse within the American psyche, whether it is due to some idea of supposed exceptionalism as a unique nation-state in history, or to the continual indoctrination into its importance as part of our educational and social apparatus. This impulse seems to drive the desires of its adherents rather than steer a clearly rational plan. As easily as it can be identified, it cannot so easily be codified into a strict program. However, it is this irrational desire that serves an important role in the greater economic structures which define American society.

The frontier consciousness most prominently functions at the scale of the individual or the local collective. It is imparted from society as a whole, but only manifests itself through individual agency. It is an agency that drives individuals to take action within the greater apparatus of capitalist development, for this is the playing field defined by the context of American culture. Thus the irrational impulse serves the rational apparatus in a symbiotic relationship. Capitalist development is fed by the impulse of frontier consciousness, the conquer-

ing and subjugation of the unknown for reasons of productivity and utility, just as it drives further cycles of frontier expansion, by placing limiting controls around subsequently established populations.

The frontier no longer exists on the western horizon, continually receding as more and more terrain is settled and promising an infinite extension toward the unknown. The unknown frontier now exists within cities long established and since abandoned, where the forgotten detritus of former capitalist modes of wealth production linger in ruin, soaking up the sun, the wind, the rain, and the expunged leftovers of society. This condition, which may have its merits as a zone of resistance against overarching global forces, will not simply vanish once revitalization occurs. It will merely be shifted, for as capital finds new areas of growth, it abandons its former interests which have already been maximized for profit. The cycle will simply continue as long as the societies and cultures that uphold its value maintain power. Those seeking to resist or occupy its least patrolled zones of rationalization will not be eradicated but will be displaced. They will find the next spaces of abandonment in which to carry on in marginalization, but also in a certain state of liberty, and in due time, the cycle of capital will find them once more.

TERRAIN VAGUE

The most valuable characterization of these zones of abandonment can be found in Ignasi de Sola-Morales' "Terrain Vague."⁴ The French term, *terrain vague*, carries a multitude of associations that provide a layered understanding to complex stretches of vacant land and forgotten structures inhabiting areas of urban decline. Within the term are associations of vacancy and absence of use, a promise of expectation, freedom of movement, and a sense of liberty from the overarching systems of power. The lack of clear definition and imposed limits which threaten establishment conventions are also the qualities that imbue such areas with undefined potential. The hovering "strangeness" of such "primordial" landscapes, Sola-Morales identifies, is a strong draw for the artistic individuals who record its traces. He points to photography as a primary means for reflecting on the imagery of terrain vague and the associations it carries for culture. The photographic construction of a gaze is instrumental in influencing the perceptions and

thus the thoughts one holds for a segment of the city. Often by turning its gaze upon terrain vague, the arts then find solace in its seeming alternative to established lifestyle modes, even as a critique of systems of power then in place. It is at such a point that mythologizing can occur, similar to the romantic urge to preserve the realms of “virgin” nature untouched by the corruption of humanity. If terrain vague provides an alternate to bourgeois conventions, then why should it not be preserved as an escapist utopia? By turning the eye to the marginalized post-industrial fringe, it is brought into greater awareness, but in doing so may again begin functioning within the cycles of the socio-economic apparatus.

PASTORALISM

Within the cycles of frontier expansion, established development, and renewed growth, conceptual sub-frameworks articulate more specific modes of engagement. A particular subset includes the *urban pastoral*, which functions particularly within established metropolitan areas that have suffered economic decline and an exodus of population from their inner urban core. Once areas of the inner core are abandoned, the former infrastructure that once served its vitality falls into entropic decline. A condition of ruin emerges for the buildings, bridges, sidewalks, streets, and other amenities that once established the urban form of the area. Within this condition, the abandoned structures are often not totally void of inhabitation, but rather attract the marginalized urban population – the impoverished, drug-ridden, or homeless, those with limited means of social and economic advancement, or those ostracized from the greater majority of the population.

Given the often socially-inspired impulses of creative or artistic individuals, these zones of terrain vague are not totally ignored by the overarching culture at large. Through strategic infiltrations or interventions, the production of images, film, or texts which relate to these areas, an awareness of such *poché* conditions is made evident to the urban establishment at large. Prominent examples include many photographers, who through the assumed directness of their medium perhaps best exemplify the act of urban pastoral. Shaun O’Boyle has documented the detritus of former shipyards and industry around New York City.⁵ Similarly, Michael Dalton’s photographs in his “Building Vio-

lence” series reflect on the post-industrial in the northeast rustbelt.⁶ Andrew Moore’s imagery has revealed much of the poetic within the blight of Detroit’s industrial ruins.⁷

Motivations will vary widely as to why individuals engage in such contexts, from the purely aesthetic to more socially-minded hopes of revitalization. Aside from the source of motivation, it is these individually-driven actions within the post-industrial landscape that enable the urban pastoral to transpire. Just as the pastoral functioned within previous generations of artistic production, the urban pastoral similarly reacts to a found context and works out the ideation of its image to a greater subjective body which ends up having the means and capital to transform the areas as demand occurs.

IDEOLOGY

There are several strains of thought, perhaps better articulated as impulsive desires, which guide how Americans engage with and reveal their landscape and built environment. Leo Marx has articulated these in his essay on “The American Ideology of Space.”⁸ Dominant among the ideologies is the utilitarian conception, which emphasizes interacting with the land in order to create use-value, or to bring it into an existing economic system of capitalist enterprise maximizing its commoditized potential in various forms. The vast majority of America’s built environment owes its existence to such impulses, and the process of development could not function without a translation of appropriated land and resources into the exchange-value of capital.

As this concept of utility remains dominant it takes on the guise of progress, leading to ever greater manifestations of wealth and thus the seeming achievement of higher levels of status and success. It has found its most resilient opposition through a recurring strain of pastoralism within American culture and thought. The pastoral, as a genre of poetry and painting, has dealt with the harmonious blending of civilized society with the perceived purity of undisturbed nature. It is here that many visions of a pastoral “middle landscape” are located, functioning on the threshold between the perceived artificiality and corruption of the commercial and urban versus the redeeming virtues of the natural and rural. Such visions have oscillated throughout American history, within the arts by painters like

Thomas Cole, in literature with Emerson and Thoreau, and in design from Jefferson to Olmsted to Frank Lloyd Wright.

It is such a pastoral vision that can also emerge when speculating on the post-industrial decay of contemporary American cities. Due to the condition of abandonment and lack of maintenance, the remains of former factories, warehouses, rail yards, and other industrial infrastructure has taken on an evocative patina and image of ruin. In the sense of the Ancient or Gothic ruins of the Romantic era, these post-industrial ruins were "naturalized." Since they now stand apart from the everyday functioning part of the city which is clearly demarcated by thriving business and active public life, they are assumed not to be a part of society's active built environment through a dialectic turn, thus taking on the otherness of "nature."

It is at this point of re-naturalization that the pastoral can manifest itself. Here is a liminal landscape, neither totally of humanity's present functioning realm nor of a primal natural wilderness. It is truly a "middle landscape," but one forgotten and neglected. In its perceived condition, it gives the impressions of being empty, uninhabited, unclaimed, unbounded, and even ahistorical in a sense. Ultimately it can give the impression of having the potential for adding value that is currently absent. Through these qualities, it takes on the character that Leo Marx identified as what the first European explorers discovered in the seemingly limitless abundance of a virgin American land. They are the same qualities that helped to first generate the American spatial ideology during the initial era of exploration and colonization. Thus the post-industrial urban pastoral finds itself folded back into the dominant utilitarian ideal and ultimately at the service of the ideology of progress. Essentially, as abandoned zones are transformed into valuable entities once more, they return to a state analogous to their prior success during the industrial heyday preceding their decline.

DIALECTICAL LANDSCAPE

Robert Smithson provides a seminal expose of the urban pastoral in his essay, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey."⁹ Written in 1967, it documents a visit he makes to a small town on the periphery of the New York City metropolitan region.

There he finds a series of mundane infrastructural elements, from concrete abutments to pumping derricks, which he characterizes as "monuments." His tongue-in-cheek characterization also carries an undertone of deadpan seriousness, where he manages to discover moments of poetic interest in the bland, unadorned, and out-of-mind features typical of postwar development. For him, it helps to establish the basis for what it means to engage with the land as an artistic act, to be later realized in "earthwork" pieces such as the *Spiral Jetty*. Yet the essay also demonstrates one of the first clear impulses that can be described as the post-industrial pastoral. Understood in the context of Leo Marx's ideological framework, Smithson is very much engaged with seeing and experiencing the American landscape as a conflicted merging of a found natural context with the overlaid implements of a technologically-driven culture.

Smithson's pastoral position is further clarified in his 1973 essay, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape."¹⁰ Again, the tension between the impositions of human-made systems on a "natural" context is highlighted, but this time through a discussion of Olmsted's Central Park. In Olmsted, Smithson identifies a strong example of the pastoral inclination, where Olmsted seeks to merge the soft, rurally-inspired landscapes of Uvedale Price and William Gilpin with the harsh urbanity of the industrial metropolis. Olmsted's approach is understood as one of a dialectic – a synthesis of two supposedly opposite qualities – into a synthetic whole. Because Olmsted deals with the physical and material realities of a built project, it is understood as a dialectical materialism. It is not just pictorial representation or idealistic formalism being expounded, but a direct intervention into the constructed environment with all of its accompanying contradictions. There is nothing static about the pastoralism of Central Park as it is in a continual process of change and transformation. From the filling in of planted foliage to the cutting of new transverse tunnels to the imprint of graffiti to the cracked mud surface of arid ponds, the park remains in constant flux. This is a key feature of Olmsted's dialectical materialism. It functions as a process more than a product, and as such is capable of flexible adaptation and evolutionary shifts over time. To acknowledge such processes is to understand the systematic nature of the urban realm and not to idealize it as a fixed utopian im-

age. Such a pastoral position is one capable of envisioning change in a context that might otherwise seem frozen in its current condition and incapable of re-imagination. It is a position that might allow one to gaze upon the remnants of post-industrial decline and find new meanings within it.

THE PASTORAL STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

The pastoral serves simultaneously as both a genre of artistic impulse and an ideological stance within an existing social apparatus. The most blatant and obvious forms typically share a common genre, yet not all of its examples may claim to be a clear articulation of a critically resistant ideology. Even the forms that can make claim to critical engagement suffer the same endemic potential as its more non-ideological expressions. As Tafuri demonstrated and architectural discourse has mulled over for many decades, the ideological impulse of avant-garde resistance is quickly mollified and folded into the overriding forces of capitalist development.¹¹ Thus the pastoral as both genre and ideology finds itself serving a role akin to the frontier consciousness. It functions as an underlying impulse that manifests itself into driven conceptual acts, appropriates the spaces and language of the *terrain vague*, and in doing so finds appropriation into further cycles of capital. In many ways, it serves as the first phase of exploration into the forgotten zones of past abandonment. As new explorers are followed by more permanent settlers, the frontier, formerly a zone of perceived mobility and freedom, is again territorialized and claimed as investment. The process of gentrification takes hold, and if properly situated for such growth, the *terrain vague* of the post-industrial city may find itself no longer quite so vague. It will become the site of economic rationalization, establishment conventions, and the erection or adaptation of architecture that serves the social and economic apparatus of its society. Its former condition of abandoned ruin, with its associated romantic sensibility as a primordial landscape, will perhaps not be preserved in any meaningful sense, but it will likely realize a new potential as a developed extension (or reclamation) of the adjacent functioning fabric. Effectively, it may be reintegrated into an urban fabric that both “functions” and “produces” for the economic engine of its metropolis, serving a very similar and vital role as it once did during the height of the industrial city itself.

Thus the pastoral phase of the post-industrial will at once serve a vital yet temporal role in the expression of artistic sensibilities regarding social conditions, their manifestation in visual and verbal forms, and provide an instrumental role in the appropriation of its spaces into the frontier ethos of capitalist development. A certain resonance of romantic nostalgia may remain for those of an elevated intellectual affection when this process becomes firmly established. A yearning for the assumed freedoms and liberty of marginalized areas outside of the conventionalized neighborhoods of the capitalist city may onset. However, for the majority of economic and political interests, the adaptation of the residual will provide a continual source of future growth as humanity reaches its limits in terms of global habitation and resource consumption.

RE-APPROPRIATION

The urban pastoral functions as a conceptual framework for engagement within the post-industrial landscape of the city. Operating primarily at the level of individual or smaller collective agency, it provides a mode of operation for acts of creative subversion within an expanded urban field. From Sola-Mirales’ *terrain vague* to Smithson’s notions of dialectical landscape to characterizations of urban *poché* or residual zones of blight, many different descriptions exist that relate to these operative areas of engagement in the city. Writers such as Sola-Mirales and Smithson articulated their viewpoints at varying stages during the materialization of the post-industrial, service-oriented metropolis. Conditions that they identified expressed these new modes of engaging with the inner core decline and its evident visual and formal impact. It is within their descriptions that the fields of action for the pastoral can be identified but not the pastoral itself. The pastoral is not the found environment or urban context but rather the operating mode for acting within it. It maintains a vital connection to its articulation as a means of visual or verbal expression – to its ideation as image or articulation as language.

Thus the pastoral strain of the American experience can reemerge once more, but in a form no longer focused simply on a critique of the industrial city. Instead, the contemporary urban pastoral is about reengaging the now post-industrial city, and re-conceptualizing what it means to be urban in such a context. With Smithson’s reading of Olmsted it

can be seen how the pastoral is about the dialectic of urbanity to nature. During Olmsted's time, finding a release valve for the strenuous impact of the industrial metropolis was the focus. Now, with a post-industrial, postwar suburban and exurban form of urbanization as the dominant mode of development in America, the critique redirects itself. The solace and harmony that the "middle landscape" of landscaped suburban enclaves once promised as a remedy to the ills of the industrial city falters as a sustainable form of long-term growth. The frontier of the suburban periphery remains dominant at this moment, but as the continued strain of resources and population growth globally shifts the distribution of goods, services, and lifestyle expectations locally, the new frontier reveals itself within the derelict and abandoned terrain vague of the inner city. It is here that the now fully manifested *urban* pastoral takes on new meaning.

The urban pastoral is a subversive urbanism that seeks to reinvigorate the central core and its immediate vicinity rather than distribute its functional pieces across a wider swath of peripheral land. It remains fundamentally a pastoral impulse, as articulated by Leo Marx, in that it is a compromise between a full-on utilitarian domination of space and the unfeasible primitivist return to nature. It seeks a "middle landscape" of sorts, but one that is now bringing the vitality of the urban back into a "naturalized" landscape instead of vice versa. Such a liminal condition rightfully surfaces within the ambiguity of post-industrial terrain vague, the estranged nether region of the former bustling commercial metropolis of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Smithson spoke of the "ruins in reverse" that he encountered in his perambulating of Passaic – the unfinished fragments of new construction that existed in a state of incompleteness in the postwar development he traversed. Now it is the *reversal of ruins* where the abandoned structures of previous generations, which once embodied a thriving capitalist economy at the forefront of America's dominant world influence, find a new role as the base infrastructure for emerging communities and the revival of residential life in the inner city. The urban pastoral leads the way in this conceptualization, where it ultimately merges into the dominance of utility and progress, to fully express the singular American ideology of space as it has continually transpired since the founding of the nation.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. *The Necessity for Ruins*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.
- 2 Lerup, Lars. *After the City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001, and Pope, Albert. *Ladders*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997.
- 3 Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*. Ed. John Mack Faragher. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994. 31-60.
- 4 Sola-Morales, Ignasi de. "Terrain Vague." *Anyplace*. Ed. Cynthia Davidson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995. 118-123.
- 5 O'Boyle, Shaun. *Modern Ruins: Portraits of Place in the Mid-Atlantic Region*. State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.
- 6 Dalton II, Michael J. "Michael J. Dalton II." Accessed August 8, 2010. <http://www.michaeldaltonphoto.com>
- 7 Moore, Andrew. *Detroit Disassembled*. Akron, OH: Damiani/Akron Art Museum, 2010.
- 8 Marx, Leo. "The American Ideology of Space." *Denatured Visions: Landscape and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Eds. Stuart Wrede and William Howard Adams. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003. 62-78.
- 9 Smithson, Robert. "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey." *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Ed. Jack Flam. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996. 68-74.
- 10 Smithson, Robert. "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape." *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Ed. Jack Flam. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996. 157-171.
- 11 Tafuri, Manfredo. *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976.