Globalised Aestheticisation of Urban Decay

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Abstract

In relation to landscape, Antoine Picon argues that we are on the eve of an aesthetic re-enchantment of the world (Picon 2000). Contemporary landscape – and this is a global trait – is predominantly technological, manufactured, and hybrid. Not only its physical features but also our understanding of it has changed dramatically in the past few decades. I would like to devote my paper to developing some considerations about this anxious landscape cluttered with the rusty scraps of technological past, about the obsolete in urban landscape, or, about urban decay.

I am especially interested in the re-enchantment of urban decay within contemporary technological landscape. It has recently been brought about by scholars, artists and others who like spending their time exploring the anxious and scrappy urban landscape. In the paper, I use their accounts and imaginary of the landscape in order to sketch out the emerging ways of aestheticisation or emotional response to such places. Since the interest as well as urban exploration movement is global, this leads me to draw some considerations about landscape as an emerging specific global experience. Landscape is not only globalised on a material level – as a locus and product of production-consumption cycles – but it is becoming so also on an experiential level.

In his article on contemporary urban landscape architecture historian Antoine Picon argues that landscape has profoundly changed in the last few decades and that what we need is to attune to the newly emerged aesthetics (Picon 2000). In this paper, I would like to develop further some of Picon's insights regarding this emerged landscape and the aesthetics that goes hand in hand with it. I am specifically interested in the urban decay, those obsolete, rusty and scrappy bits and pieces scattered around drawing our immediate attention to the past of contemporary landscape that has become predominantly technological, manufactured, and hybrid, governed by the city and reshaped and reworked according to its needs and tastes.

Keywords: landscape, urban decay, urban exploration, globalisation

Contemporary landscape and urban decay

Since the industrial revolution, it is the city that "constitutes the most primary landscape, the one we have directly before our eyes," the one that is no more rural and pastoral but rather technological, fractal, disturbing and seemingly boundless, sprawling into its surroundings and absorbing them (Picon 2000, 67). Contemporary landscape is predominantly functional, technological and lousy with an over-abundance of aesthetic stimuli. This essential and explicit functionality of urban landscape grounded in technology and expressed by the aesthetic over-abundance of intentions and stimuli goes hand in hand with the process of "accelerated aging", when the objects suddenly cease to serve the function they were designed for and become obsolete.

Regarding Western landscape tradition grounded in pictorial framing, detachment of spectator and a kind of peacefulness of contemplating mind, the anti-landscape character of contemporary landscape Picon speaks about can be seen as leading to the very anxiety he

identifies as one of its key characteristics. What Picon suggests, however, is that we are maybe at the eve of a re-enchantment of our seemingly anaesthetic yet aesthetically over-abundant world (Picon 2000).

In what follows, I will concentrate on the obsolete in the landscape that I provisionally call urban decay and by means of that I will try to support my belief that there has been a kind of aesthetic attunement to the anxious landscape emerging. However, considering its background and objects, this taste for urban decay is not as detached from Western landscape tradition as it could seem.

I will analyse this emerging attunement or at least the aesthetically informed interest on three levels. I believe we can observe it within academia and hence I will at first summarise some of the works done by academics on urban decay. Then I will move on to those who actively seek to experience the urban decay and I will analyse the accounts of experiencing it. This will lead to how urban decay has been (visually) represented, which is the third and most complex level I will plunge into. Since the taste for urban decay seems to be global, all the three levels will help me to draw some reflections on the nature of globalisation, which will also take me back to where I started – to the contemporary landscape and its nature.

Urban decay analysed …

Regarding social science, strange and marginal spaces have become more and more a central topic since de Certeau (1984) and Lefebvre (1991). While deCerteau inspires analyses to concentrate on the everydayness and practice, tactics and strategies, Lefebvre turned the attention to the opaqueness of space, to the very fact that space (and representation of space) reveals as well as hides (Jansson and Lagerkvist 2009, 3). Since then strange spaces of any kind have been used to unravel politics as well as poetics of space, probably because their "strangeness" helps the hidden to become visible. Gandy (2005) for example shows how a strand in geography has recently turned to cyborg as a metaphor for hybridity of space and by means of it approached the city.

Urban decay represents an example of strange as well as hybrid space and as such, although termed differently, has been analysed in various studies employing diverse approaches and accentuating different facets. Thus Gandy (2006) uses Los AngelesRiver, concreted river basin weaving unnoticed through the backstage of LA, in order to discuss the encounter of nature with modernist urban planning, while Williams (2004) discusses the redevelopment of the Albert Dock in Liverpool in order to analyse material changes brought to the city by de-industrialization and globalised capital.

Tim Edensor on the other hand examines industrial ruins with respect to sensory experience and argues that such marginal spaces are far richer than common urban space (Edensor 2007). He also asserts that the disordered materiality of industrial ruins cannot be confined within a single narrative of the past and that it opens up possibilities for alternative, more personal and less ordered histories (Edensor 2005a). Employing the metaphor of ghost that haunts in different manners the ruined spaces, he also argues that such spaces are more vibrant and less regulated, opened to more playful approach and thus thanks to unregulated multiple material affordances represents a spatial counterpart to the urban space (Edensor 2005b, 2005c). For example Trigg approaches urban decay similarly when he asserts that we are attracted to it because of its aesthetic qualities, by the "embroidery of decay" (Trigg 2004 quoted in Armstrong 2006).

Spectral metaphors of ghost and haunting have been used on a more general level by authors like Pile (2005) or Holloway and Kneale (2008) in order to capture the geographical (urban) world in a livelier and more enchanted manner since they believe it to be more enchanted and less generalised than it appears in academic texts. The metaphor of a ghost

draws on the Freudian notion of uncanny describing the potential to experience the familiar becoming unfamiliar (Vidler 1992, 7). For obvious reasons, urban decay can be and often is conceived as being uncanny, since it offers to experience the familiar-unfamiliar shift.

I hope this brief – and surely not exhausting – overview showed why social scientists are increasingly attracted to and interested in urban decay. One of the reasons is clearly expressed by Armstrong while she argues for the landscape of contempt – as she calls it – because of the experiential and emotional possibilities it offers. The second reason is, as I tried to show in detail elsewhere (Gibas 2008), a political one – spaces of urban decay open up possibilities for alternatives and for more critical approach to planning and to the politics of memory and urban space.

… experienced, …

In the work on technological sublime Nye traces the development of the sublime experience of technology and of works of modernity such as bridges, factories, dams, technological networks and means of transport. He shows that the accomplishments of technological progress used to stimulate strong emotional response in the general public. Technology and its outcomes used to be approached with awe, terror, and fascination – they used to be sublime (Nye 1994). Complementary to his study is a paper by Kaika and Swyngedouw in which they disclose how the sublime experience of modernity rose and then subsided into a disinterested neglect together with the exhaustion of the project of modernity as such (Kaika and Swyngedouw 2000).

It could thus seem that urban decay would today only arouse contempt and unfocused disinterest. However, there is a growing movement of people who devote their free time and energy to explore such spaces in detail. They are usually labelled – by themselves as well as by others – urban explorers since their aim is to explore hidden and inaccessible parts of the city – technological networks as well as abandoned spaces, everything marked with the sign "No entry". As Ninjalicious, one of the founding fathers put it: "Urban explorers strive to actually earn their experiences, by making discoveries that allow them to get in on the secret workings of cities and structures, and to appreciate fantastic, obscure spaces that might otherwise go completely neglected" (Infiltration n/d). Indeed, urban exploration does not devote itself solely to urban decay, but a brief look at various exploration web pages as well as magazines reveals that urban decay constitutes one of the main targets to be explored.

A quick Google search shows many web pages, magazines and zines, discussion boards, hubs and rings that are devoted to urban exploration, to sharing experience and photographs, discussing strategies and tactics etc. In order to discuss the experience of urban exploration and of urban decay, I chose one particular Internet magazine – Explonation[37] – that is devoted to providing "a photographic view of the normally unseen or off-limits parts of urban areas or industrial facilities. These areas are unlikely to be seen by the everyday public and as redevelopment occurs these places will be lost forever, taking their history and secrets with them. The contributors aim to capture and record this before it's too late" (Explonation 2009).

To explore and experience places with special respect to those that could be lost in the future and to capture them in a narrative or photographically are the key issues of urban exploration as presented in the Explonation and as such the exploration is wrapped up in a specific set of emotions. Even only the names of the articles in the two already published issues of the Explonation tell a lot: Myth Chateau, Pleasure Beach Ghost Town, Prison Blues, Frozen in Time, or Another World reveal a kind of aestheticisation infused with nostalgia, sadness and maybe sublimity as in the account of an abandoned chateau: "the ornate ceilings

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[37] Accessible at http://www.explonation.com/

were breathtaking and yet tinged with sadness" (*Explonation* 1 2009, 10). In another account – that of a ghost town – we can see how nostalgia induced by material setting expressing the obsolescence of the place is closely linked to aesthetic qualities of the place that can arouse a mixture of sadness, fascination, awe, and aesthetic pleasure: "It was like Magic! As we relished in this amazing photograph opportunity I couldn't help but feel sad. Not only for the people of this once lovely town, but for the lonely town itself" (*Explonation* 2, 8-9).

Here nostalgia is an aesthetic category, sought after by people equipped with cameras in order to capture it. I believe the decay is aestheticised partly because it can induce strong emotional reaction the contemporary landscape as analysed by Picon cannot any more. In fact, the strong interlink between exploration and photography and the aestheticisation of decay that induces nostalgia and sublimity, references us more to Western landscape tradition, since the aestheticisation helps the explorer to detach her/himself from the scene, to contemplate peacefully what lies before the lens of his/her camera and to frame it in a similar way romantic painters did more than century ago: "We spent several hours in the school, the years of neglect have done a nice job on the building and the colour scheme is beautiful with the strong light through the glass roof" (*Explonation* 2, 33).

One of common descriptions of the explored spaces is that it is a kind of "another world", which expresses the detachment of the photographer from the scene – s/he is an observer uninterested in much more than her/his experience of pictorially framing the right emotion with a camera: "A beautiful orange ray of light started to illuminate the tanks. … First shot. "Clap". I started to run after the light trying to get best of the place. … We felt like we were in a science fiction. … Weird and Spooky!"(*Explonation* 2, 17).

Paging through Explonation makes anybody understand how much is urban exploration a photographic endeavour. The experience of the place and the photographs of it merge into one whole in the magazine as well as in the activity itself, since explorers are "in it for the thrill of discovery and a few nice pictures" (Infiltration n/d). It seems that for urban explorers photographs are the most common way of sharing the emotions and the experience of the particular explored place and in fact the places as such. The accounts of the explorations as well as the photographs taken resemble each other. What ensues from the accounts is the fact that explorers seek at different and various diverse places still the same nostalgic-and-sublime experience and this quest leads them to a particular experiential, emotional and visual framing of the world.

… and photographed

Urban exploration happens all over the world. It is maybe true, that locals do not necessarily have to perceive the places at stake in the same way explorers do; it does not however contradict the fact that urban exploration is a global movement with all the complexities that this can mean. The places explored are located in various world regions, the explorers come from different countries, the web pages are in different languages and photographs taken in similar style are the main vehicle for sharing experience and emotions. The landscape of urban exploration is framed in a particular way. The activity in general result in the most neglected and marginal spaces being taken up on a global level and in the form of photographs of one genre made circulate within a global network of at least those people who are similarly attuned to their aesthetics.

The Internet offers countless pages where urban decay lay and semi-professional photographs have been exposed to criticism of anybody interested in the genre or in photography in general. Although places depicted in them are from various corners of the world, their stylistic similitude, and the same interest in representing the nostalgic-sublime experience of decay make them variations on the same theme. Moreover, they do so in a very explicit manner amplified by similar commentaries and narratives that accompany them. The

urban decay became to some extent, as one photographer expressed it in an interview, a material for "ruin porn" photography (Vice n/d).

Nevertheless, being pornographically explicit and repetitive or not, these photographs circulating on a global level encompass quite complicated and complex geographies. As della Dora shows, photographs apart from being representations must be considered also objects on their own endowed with their agency. As such, and I believe it is true also for digital photographs flickering on a computer screen, they can activate intimate geographies of emotions and experience, they make places to circulate through space and time, and they help shaping geographical imaginations (della Dora 2009). This is all true for urban decay photographed and published on the web.

These complex geographies are moreover complicated by the works of professional photographers who at least since Hilda and Bernd Becher have been interested in urban decay and who transcend the genre of urban decay discussed previously. Works of photographers like Edward Burtynsky's Manufactured landscapes (2006), Stanley Greenberg's Hidden New York (1998), or Václav Jirásek's Industria (2006) – just to mention a few – use the urban decay or abandonment in order to investigate issues not dissimilar to those that contemporary social science, and geography in particular, is occupied with.

Thus Greenberg's exploration of technological underground in New York poses questions about the link between place, technology, and the obviosity of (energy) consumption and its phantasmagoria (see also Kaika and Swyngedouw 2000); Jirásek's Industria explores the spatial and social consequences of transformation of socialist into post-socialist and capitalist society; and Burtynsky's Manufactured Landscape traces the paths of production-consumption cycles and the ways they transform and reshape contemporary landscape worldwide.

Working both locally (Jirásek, Greenberg) and worldwide (Burtynsky), the artworks of these photographers contribute to a globally re-produced understanding of contemporary landscape and reworking of our aesthetic attunement to our immediate as well as far-distant, imaginary and already nonexistent world. The particular places do not matter as much as urban explorers try to persuade the visitors of their web pages, because they meet on a global level, which suppresses their particularities. What matters is an emotionally aesthetic, or maybe aesthetically emotional, response that lies in behind this specific visual style of framing and thus interpreting the landscape.

What I wanted to show here is my belief that we nowadays witness a kind of re-enchantment of the contemporary technological landscape. Contrary to Picon, I perceive this re-enchantment stemming from Western landscape tradition however focused on the most neglected or overlooked urban spaces. To plunge into the stream can lead us to draw interesting connections between various theoretical and thematic areas including globalisation, policies of urban space, photographic representation of landscape etc. that I have sketched here.

All this can be detected on a global level. Nevertheless, what I have been talking about is a different kind of globalisation that is not based on the flow of capital, goods or people, although it is indeed informed by all of it, but on the circulation of aesthetically charged representations of the most marginal spaces. This flow has been reshaping our understanding of contemporary landscape on a general level, its aesthetic and experiential values as well as our most personal as well as general geographical imagination. To acknowledge this provides a good starting point to understand globalisation also in terms of emotional or aesthetic experience.

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