

Review: Photographing the urban void

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By Patricia Lowry / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

"Terrain Vague: Photography, Architecture and the Post-Industrial Landscape," the new exhibit at Carnegie Museum of Art's Heinz Architectural Center, isn't so much about photography and architecture as it is about place and the meaning of place.

The places depicted in "Terrain Vague" are the forgotten bits of American landscape that seem to have escaped the notice of the design police. You know the type: strip malls, industrial parks, decaying neighborhoods, auto junkyards, vacant lots, brownfield sites. Often they exist on the unincorporated edges of cities and suburbs, where the community's guard is down and the result is an aesthetic-free zone where almost anything goes.

The exhibit, which debuted last year at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, takes its name and inspiration from an eponymous, seminal essay written by Barcelona architect and critic Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio and published in 1995. In it, he gave the French term "terrain vague" new currency by associating it with the tendency among contemporary photographers, beginning in the 1970s, to explore their fascination with voids in the urban landscape -- vacant spaces where activity once occurred but does no more.



"Igor," 1987, by Philip-Lorca DeCorcia



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#2077 of the series "House Hunting" by Todd Hido

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"Terrain Vague" features panel discussion

"Urbanisms and the Dilemma of Everyday Space" is the title of a panel discussion that will be held in conjunction with "Terrain Vague" at 1 p.m. today at Carnegie Museum of Art Theater. It is free with museum admission.

Four panelists will explore issues of unresolved space, social routine and trends in urban design. They are:

- Andy Anderson, filmmaker and writer in residence, University of Texas, who will comment on his video "Drive-By Shooting."
- Margaret Crawford, professor of Urban Planning and Design, Harvard Design School, who will talk about the evolution of the built environment and the meanings associated with ever-changing public spaces in the United States.
- Ruth Dusseault, co-curator of "Terrain Vague," who will describe her ongoing photographic projects that respond to new suburban and exurban environments.
- Photographer Todd Hido, who will discuss his nighttime photographs of vacant suburban sites.

"The relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential" of terrain vague, he wrote.

He wonders why photographers no longer celebrate the heroic, thriving, monumental city the way their predecessors did in the early 20th century, and suggests it may be because "The Romantic imagination, which still survives in our contemporary sensibility, feeds on memories and

expectations."

It was ever thus. Creative types of all stripes and intent, from William Kent and his 18th-century English landscape gardens to German neo-expressionist Anselm Kiefer and his Holocaust-haunted paintings, long have held ruins in high regard. Flaws and storied pasts are infinitely more intriguing than perfection and blank slates, as every playwright knows.

Sola-Morales, too, sees a dark side, as the enthusiasm for these vacant spaces also reflects "our strangeness in front of the world, in front of our city, before ourselves."

But if contemporary art "seems to fight for the preservation" of these alien spaces, what is the proper stance for the architect, whose job it is to rehabilitate such places?

This is the position in which Chris Jarrett, one of the co-curators of "Terrain Vague," finds himself. In the spirit of duality and ambiguity that so characterizes this exhibit, Jarrett, associate director of the College of Architecture at Georgia Institute of Technology, embraces the artistic possibilities presented by terrain vague as he works to eradicate it: The design studios he teaches focus on remaking urban brownfields.

In the exhibit, Jarrett and co-curator Ruth Dusseault, a photographer who also teaches at Georgia Tech and is the architecture department's artist-in-residence, broaden Sola-Morales's definition of terrain vague to include places that are not physical voids, but are similar in spirit, having a kind of psychic void. Some, like Catherine Opie's pictures of strip malls and highway overpasses, are shot at dawn and devoid of people, transforming their character from bustling and optimistic to eerie and ominous.

The rubber mesas and mountains formed by the California tire piles in Edward Burtynsky's photographs have a terrible beauty that enchants and repulses. We are seduced by detail and rhythm -- the textures of treads, the repetition of warped and perfect circles -- and put off by the knowledge that they constitute a nasty, hazardous blight.

Lewis Baltz's images of new industrial parks, shot in 1973, are as formalist as Josef Albers's paintings, each one carefully cropped to position roll-up garage doors, a row of gas meters or a wall of decorative concrete blocks just so within the frame. Through judicious editing, Baltz has transformed the banal into art.

The newly minted California suburb Bill Owens lived in and photographed in 1972 seems a curious choice for the exhibit, as we must (and do) come equipped with our own sense of irony, which Owens, who views the suburbs as a viable lifestyle choice, didn't intend.

The lone filmmaker in this field of 10 is Andy Anderson, who collected police reports over a two-month span in his Fort Worth, Texas, neighborhood and filmed the blocks in which they occurred.

"A man said he went to a topless bar to find a man who owed him money. When he found him, the man spit in his face and hit him in the head with a bottle," Anderson states in "Drive-By Shooting," in a narration as deadpan as the filming. Buildings scroll by, a landscape deepened

with new meaning.

"In what ways might photography, of the sort exhibited in 'Terrain Vague,' have significance for architecture?" Jarrett concludes. "Perhaps it is in terms of understanding the urban site as a complex subject, which requires alternative observational strategies in order to see it for what it is." Heinz Architectural Center department assistant Divya Rao capably oversaw the installation of the show, which continues through June 20. It was brought in by HAC curator Tracy Myers, who thought it would resonate with Pittsburghers because of our own catalog of similar sites.

You betcha. Days after I left this memorable exhibit, I found myself longing to see one devoted to the terrain vague of Western Pennsylvania. Annie O'Neill's photographs of the abandoned interiors of the Armstrong Cork buildings and Steve Mellon's images of Homestead and Braddock immediately came to mind.

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