

Notes on not being there

Will Pollard

1.

I have never been to the corner of Gloucester and Manchester Streets, and I have only seen Blaine Western and Michael Parr's *neither a window, opening or wall* in photographs.

It's perhaps a little strange to write from such a distance, but I want to say that it's also in some way appropriate – their work being an intervention in city-space, and our ways of thinking about cities having been influenced so impressively by the photographic image.

In the daily life of the city, we witness the strange confluence of two industries now utterly reliant on photography: real estate and tourism. Both use photography to construct and maintain certain profitable understandings of the city.

- i. The estate agent's window gallery supports cycles of land purchase, sale and rent by imagining the importance of place.
- ii. Perfect assortments of postcard pictures, validations of monuments, are exported in the bum-bags of tourists.

But photography is also complicit in the shaping of the city itself. On this last point, and in the history of its special relationship with the city, we can say that photography has been mercenary in its deployment; aerial photographs are agents of both destruction and renewal, being useful in the planning of bombing raids as well as subdivisions.

(Google Maps allows anyone to plan the most efficient route to the airport, but also to find the best of their neighbours' swimming pools to sneak into after dark).

The Catalan architectural theorist Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió emphasises the impossibility of separating 'our understanding of modern architecture from the mediating role [of] photographers'.¹ He draws a trajectory, however, which traces the changing themes of our photographic attention. (After all, we all know that portraits of

¹ Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, "Terrain Vague," in *Anyplace*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), 118.

architectural success are very much old hat). From the 1970s, Solà-Morales argues, empty or abandoned city spaces became the new objects of our fascination. And he says these vacant lots, ‘in which a series of occurrences have taken place’, have appeared to ‘subjugate the eye of the urban photographer’ ever since.²

Solà-Morales refers to these spaces with the French term *terrain vague*, enjoying the tripartite signification of ‘vague’ in that language. The word can mean ‘wave’ or ‘vacant’, as well as ‘vague’ in the sense with which we in English are familiar. The constellation of these definitions affords us an idea of spaces that, by virtue of their vacancy, are in some way free, but which are also imbued with the possibility of indeterminate action – just as the sea might *swell*.

In the context of our busy contemporary city, a *terrain vague* is a deviant space: it’s not doing any work. And precisely because it is *useless* it is exciting – inviting misuse or trespass. (Where shall we get drunk before the opening?) Though if empty spaces provide ways to escape the political and economic status quo, they also provide means of entry – points from which to reimagine the city’s wider assembly.

I’m reminded of those sliding puzzles, of the type found in doctors’ waiting rooms, of which one square on a grid is left blank – allowing enough room to marshal the remaining squares into some new arrangement. We can begin to entertain this analogy since the pattern of the grid is, in any event, one of the defining features of our cities. This in itself signals the economic systems at work in the development of cities, as the American writer Lewis Mumford narrates:

From the standpoint of the new real-estate speculators, this type of plan was perfect. Each lot, being of uniform shape, became a unit, like a coin, capable of ready appraisal and exchange.³

(Even school children who leave coins on railway tracks to see them deformed under the wheels of the train know the twin pleasures of disavowing the value of currency, and ignoring the authority that outlaws the mutilation of the same).

2.

In the winter of 1872 (roughly a century before Solà-Morales argues we began in earnest to seek out those ‘unincorporated margins, interior islands void of activity’⁴) the English novelist Anthony Trollope was in Christchurch, and he was sad.

Trollope had come to the young city in the course of a trans-Tasman tour, and might have hoped to see some evidence of its long-planned cathedral. A later writer will record that despite eight years having passed since the start of construction, at this

² Ibid, 119.

³ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 184.

⁴ Solà-Morales, 120.

time ‘only a few inches of stone [were] showing above the ground’.⁵ The slow pace of progress in itself may have dismayed Trollope, but what he seems to have found most surprising was an unexpected lack of faith in the undertaking on the part of the populace:

There is the empty space with all the foundations of a great church laid steadfast beneath the surface; but it seemed to be the general opinion of the people that a set of public offices should be erected there instead of a cathedral. I could not but be melancholy as I learned that the honest high-toned idea of the honest high-toned founders of the colony would probably not be carried out [...]⁶

(It is curious to note this situation in view of the recent, protracted debate over the future of what would become the city’s icon – but I am getting ahead of myself).

Elsewhere in the same account Trollope is more certain about the demise of the grand project, stating simply, ‘the idea of building the cathedral is now abandoned. It was a sad sight for me to look down upon the vain foundations’.⁷ The cathedral will of course eventually be built, despite his proclamation. And yet... it might not have been.

If nothing else, we can say that for a time it seemed (to one downhearted tourist, at least) that it never would. And perhaps Christchurch might have carried a bureaucratic heart – the ‘set of public offices’ at first dismissed by Trollope – instead of a religious one. We are invited to imagine that things might have been different. What if the icon *wasn’t there*? Trollope himself entertains the benefits of the alternative:

[...] perhaps, on that spot in the middle of the city, a set of public offices will be better than a cathedral. Public offices all the community will use. A cathedral will satisfy less than one half of it – and will greatly dissatisfy the other half.⁸

3.

While Trollope was eminently concerned with *use* (and we might attribute this to the preoccupations of his, the Victorian, age), Western and Parr are not. Their work is defined in its title only by what it is not, and the ends to which it was subsequently directed befit their insouciance. Their terrain vague was at times a picnic spot for construction workers employed on (perhaps more directional) projects nearby, and at other times a stage for performance. Another name for such a place might be a playground. Playgrounds are of course designed *for* play, but we might wager that this isn’t much of a prescription at all; pure play seems a (thankfully) pointless activity.

⁵ Paul Pascoe, “The Study of the Early Buildings in the Canterbury Settlement of New Zealand, Erected by the Canterbury Pilgrims...” (MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 1933), 106.

⁶ Anthony Trollope, *Australia and New Zealand* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1873), 213.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

We might hope it is what we do when we don't have to do (or don't want to do) anything that could be misconstrued as employment.

With that said, the form of the playground is not universal. A comparison between those designed by Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck in mid-twentieth century Amsterdam and those we might find near ourselves today in a New Zealand city would seem to reveal that the scope of expected activities is more narrowly prescribed among the latter. That is to say, there are now more things to play on, but *how* you might play on them seems to have been more keenly anticipated.

In van Eyck's minimalist experiments we observe the bare minimum of persuasion. His playgrounds consist for the most part of a handful of isolated modules: simple climbing frames, a sandpit, some stepping-stones. The most important aspect of the overall design seems to be the wide spaces between these elements – the things that *aren't there*, the room to do *whatever*. All of this, no doubt, matters more to the adults like me who are busy thinking about playgrounds than the children who are busy playing in them, but the greater range of specific activities provided for at a present day playground does seem to betray a difference in approach.

Note also that exercise stations have been incorporated into the landscape of the contemporary playground, inviting the repetition of discrete bodily actions with the aim (benevolent or not) of seeing a quantifiable outcome of play.

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