

The unmemorable place

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Early in my life I became fascinated by the environment around me and the influence it can have on someone's personal development and well-being. The fact that I have moved often - the counter now stands at fourteen times - is probably indicative.

I was born in Brussels and grew up in Scheut, a lively neighborhood in Anderlecht. In 1971, Anderlecht was still a municipality, in the so-called "rural-urban fringe", the transition zone where the rural landscape and the expanding capital, in this case the Pajottenland and Brussels, mix and collide. And where in the mid-19th century, with the digging of the Brussels-Charleroi canal, industrial development and economic activity had boomed. Together with Molenbeek, they themselves spoke of Manchester on the Senne.

That made the area extremely interesting. The environment was a patchwork of small and large factories, artisan workshops and residential houses, but also of fields with vegetables and greenhouses, pastures with cattle, parks, sports grounds and historic buildings. Our 100-year-old house was located in the middle of it all, in a lively neighborhood, a stone's throw from the slaughterhouse, the canal, an oil refinery, the Erasmus house, three breweries, a cardboard factory, a power plant, a metro shunting station, the Carthusian monastery of the Scheutists, cafes, restaurants and shopping streets.

As a child I experienced this multicolored environment as self-evident. After all, it corresponded with the cheerful, busy search prints in illustrated dictionaries and atlases for children. A heterogeneous mix of all possible architecture, infrastructure and nature, beautifully labeled from A to Z.

As I grew older, the environment became more homogeneous. The ring 0 around Brussels was constructed, so that the transition zone between city and countryside was suddenly unambiguous and clear demarcated. Within that, urbanization is now complete. The industry disappeared completely. Trade shifted neatly to suburban SME zones. Churches and monasteries were converted. Fields parceled out.

NEW TOPOGRAPHICS

Once I had a camera, and with an effort to preserve what visibly disappeared in my area, I quickly came across the New Topographics, in particular the American Stephen Shore and the German photographer couple Bernd and Hilla Becher.

They were called the "anti-photographers", the photographers who took part in the 1975 exhibition New Topographics at the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House in Rochester, together with Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, Joe Deal and Henry Wessel, among others. Their work and that of the others was miles apart from the classical landscape and urban photography that brought a romantic vision based on the subject's impeccable character.

Instead, they resolutely opted for undefined areas between urban and rural areas, such as suburbs (under construction) and industrial areas. They avoided the "interesting" historic city centers and monuments, and started to depict places where urban development evolved in a rather organic or chaotic way. In other words, in that fray zone or rural-urban fringe.

They also developed a specific style. Steven Humblet says about this in *de Witte Raaf*: "*detached, neutral, distant, descriptive ... Furthermore, they are distinguished by a studious approach, in which both the history of their own medium, the contemporary developments in the field of visual art and broader social awareness (socio-economic, urban, ecological ...) were taken into account. It is this interplay of influences from different domains that makes the images they produce extremely layered: what the photographers lose due to their restraint in personal expression, they (apparently) gain in artistic and social relevance*"

In addition, they used the relatively small size 40x50 cm for their prints.

My first series of photos that I made for my dissertation in interior architecture at the Sint-Lukas Institute was therefore indebted to the typologies of the Bechers. Starting from a particular electricity cabin in my neighborhood, I photographed a hundred electricity cabins in Flanders and cataloged them based on style features, technology, region, etc.

The importance of photographically documenting this banal architecture or places cannot be underestimated. In contrast to monuments, historical centers or landmarks, such places usually do not last long, and they rarely acquire the status of protected heritage.

In addition, photos that capture these banal places, without framing out “disturbing” elements, such as vehicles, advertising panels and infrastructure, give a more adequate impression of the prevailing street scene, and are often the only witnesses in the long term.

Finally, we can say that the term “banal” may be poorly chosen or at least not quite cover it. These photos indeed show registrations of “banal” everyday places, but that is why, unlike monuments, they are constantly subject to the vagaries of time and the needs of man, which makes them dynamic and interesting places.

Or like Stephen Shore’s photo series of ordinary places, titled “Uncommon Places”.



'Uccidiamo il Chiaro di Luna!', © Peter Chinitor | Zazourian 1994

THE UNMEMORABLE PLACE

The idea for "The unmemorable place" originates from the exhibition "Recollecting Landscapes" (S.M.A.K.-Ugent) and the work of the Belgian Magnum photographer John Vink (° 1948).

In 2004 I visited the S.M.A.K. Ghent, the exhibition Recollecting Landscapes (www.recollectinglandscapes.be), a re-photography project by Ghent University in which sixty landscape images by the botanist Jean Massart were re-photographed.

In addition to the fascinating analyzes of the landscape transformations in the successive images, I was particularly impressed by the images themselves, which perfectly matched the documentary style of the New Topographics. But where these photographers could still be blamed for some subjectivity in the choice of their subject, camera angle and lighting, this was definitely not the case here.

A little later I discovered the work of John Vink. In 1982-1983 he photographed a series of banal places, petrol stations, chip shops, garages and stations, in Brussels (and surroundings), from special camera angles where poles and road signs were prominent.

The plan was to use his photos as a compulsory program for a new series, trying to approach the same conditions (camera position, sun position, weather, format ...) as 35 years earlier.

However, the photos came without exact address details, making the quest an essential and adventurous aspect of the project. Several locations could only be traced by relying on memory and using historical aerial photographs (Bruciel), telephone directories, old road maps and Google maps, because the buildings or even entire streets simply no longer existed.

The result is a photographic investigation, a series of banal, not memorable places. But which, due to their insignificance, are very dynamic and are now also immortalized and commemorated twice.

There is no judgment, nor a nostalgic look back.
Rather the emphasis is placed on the existence of this place.

According to George Berkeley (1685-1753), material things do not exist until they have been observed (Esse est percipi). Does a rainbow exist if there is no human, animal or camera to perceive it?
Does a place exist if it has never been archived or documented?

Probably...
But I still err on the side of caution.

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