THE CIVIC LANDSCAPE: Photographing the Urban Malaise

Dr Jamie Holcombe
In the early days of photography, particularly in Europe and Britain, landscape photographs reflected a desire to provide a visual remedy to the new industrialisation of the environment, by offering what theorist Liz Wells refers to as a “therapeutic view of nature”. By the early to mid 1800s, travel had become a greater reality to more people. In 1853, Maxime du Camp, who was known as a journalist and a photographer (interestingly, the term “photojournalist” had yet to be coined) set out to compile a photographic catalogue of what he found in Egypt (Fig. 1). Historian Peter Turner writes of Du Camp’s achievements as transcending the mere topographical, suggesting that his photographs “translated the wonders of the ancient world into fine images of ruin”.

![Image of Thebes, Tomb of Ozymandias, 1850, Maxime du Camp, Calotype Photograph.](image.png)

Travellers like Du Camp set out to amass information, to observe and to catalogue every outstanding aspect of nature to satisfy a Western appetite to document and classify the world. Robert A. Sobieszek, in his essay in The Art of Fixing a Shadow (1989), tells us that the camera had provided the traveller with, what Du Camp called, “a unique modern advantage... by which the marvels of the material world
could be captured with unparalleled facticity”. Clearly for some, however, the camera came with a supercilious advantage for the travelling photographer. It rendered dominance over its subjects, as if it quite literally “captured” them. Turner confirms this arrogance, writing that “photography and exploration seemed [like] good partners, as did photography and the process of colonization”, however he suggests that the photographers themselves were more interested in selling their photographs to collectors than in colonial conquest.

In contrast, if we are to learn from this, the travelling landscape photographer of today needs to approach a subject with humility and respect. Rather than attempting to conquer or possess the places visited, the modern photographer should perhaps render landscapes with a respectful observance, mindful of those who have gone before – not just those who have trodden in the same path as a passing traveller, but those who spent their entire lives in these places, living as part of the landscape, not just a spectator of it.

Even though serious landscape photographers would consider themselves more than mere tourists, they are nonetheless travellers. They are itinerant to spaces in the natural scenery from which they draw inspiration, seeking their inherent essence. It could be said that these spaces, become places, once they have been given some kind of human emotional attachment. Thus the early landscape photographers transformed the spaces they travelled through into places when they started to publish their images to a wider audience.

I too travel to take my photographs, with my recent exhibition in 2015 titled Civic Malaise (Figs.2 & 3) incorporating locations across the entire bottom half of mainland Australia. Contrary to the new discoveries of the early explorers, I found the same thing wherever I went: not the same actual subjects, but the same sense of neglect and apathy. It seemed that different places had lost their difference, redeveloped with the sameness of other places.
The bigger centres, with their growth derived not from prosperity, but migration from those deserting the smaller towns and localities, featured the same chain stores and shopping malls, the same forgotten town centres, and the same suburban sprawl on the outskirts. I did not need to travel to photograph this, because it was everywhere, however there are still subjects that are unique to a particular location, which better confirm the endemic regional nature of our society’s malaise.

Perhaps the most apt example of this specific location that necessitated travel is my image titled Nullarbor Whale (Fig. 4). This is because it is situated virtually in the geographical centre of my travels, and equally in the symbolic heart of my rationale. Halfway across Australia, in the middle of the Nullarbor Plain and overshadowed by
a giant petroleum company’s signpost, there sits an artificial whale. The replica whale rather ironically sports a hand-painted warning to “keep off”, which is more likely inspired by fear of litigation (should someone be injured climbing on the structure) than any protestation about the ongoing human interference with real whales in their own environment. It was a rare day when there had been a downpour of rain, which filled the fenced-off recess beneath the elevated whale. It struck me that the whale was held aloft above a meagre inland sea, conquered, replicated, and owned, and could only watch as we mindlessly rush past.

Fig. 4: Nullarbor Whale, 2015, Jamie Holcombe, Digital Photographic Print, 100x150cms.

Whales aside, a discussion about landscape photography would not be complete without mentioning the elephant in the room, caused by the popularity of the genre, which generates a proliferation of derivative, cliché-ridden “pretty pictures” that rest comfortably within a pictorial aesthetic, but struggle to make beautiful representations of already beautiful subjects. Of course it is perfectly viable to make an outstanding depiction of beautiful scenery, which can be a thoroughly successful work of art, as is clearly proved by the likes of Ansel Adams, who is the repeatedly acknowledged 20th Century master of the traditional photographic landscape.
However, to achieve this, the work must offer something else besides the superficial. It needs to offer an aesthetic experience that conveys a kind of spirit of place; not just of natural beauty, but also of the presence or resonance of those who have been there before.

The “pretty picture” landscape, on the other hand, can act just like a pop song. Its appeal is usually immediate, but often short-lived, leaving a void to be filled by the next one that comes along. Cliché subjects and overly saturated colours are like saccharin sweet lyrics, wearing thin from over-use. In deliberate contrast to this, my images, whilst aesthetically considered, need time to be appreciated. They do not just need to be looked at, but also insist on contemplation, which requires an effort from the viewer better facilitated by the gallery wall or the book than the postcard calendar on the refrigerator door. My image titled Outdoor Australia (Fig. 5), framing a decrepit billboard as one might compose a beautiful natural scene, elicits this attention. The billboard, with its green coastal fringe and seemingly barren neglected centre, seems specific to Australia as a whole.

Fig. 5: Outdoor Australia, 2015, Jamie Holcombe, Digital Photographic Print, 100x150cms.
We hear words like “evocative” and “sublime” thrown around with abandon by patronising would-be critics, but these words on their own remain as superficial as the paper on which the image is printed. Fine art landscape photographers usually need to explain themselves in order to be heard above the clichés, which has become an occupational hazard of working in a popular genre.

Australian born photographer Peter Lik’s image titled *Phantom* (Fig. 6) is controversial because it fans this debate over the perceived artistic merit of landscape photography. Lik claims to have sold the photograph to an undisclosed buyer for US $6.5 million dollars, a record highest price ever paid for a photograph, but there is no documentary evidence outside of Lik’s own press release that this is true.

![Phantom](image)

*Fig. 6: Phantom, 2014, Peter Lik, large-scale Digital Photographic Print, (actual size undisclosed).*

Jonathon Jones, writing for the Guardian in 2014, launched a scathing attack on the *Phantom*, and Lik’s work in general, the critical acclaim for which seems mostly to come from Lik himself. Jones argues that the image is no different from all the others taken by tourists to the same site, namely an underground cavern in the Antelope Canyon in Arizona USA. Many of these, such as *Ancestors* (Fig. 7) taken
by Gavin Hardcastle the year before, can be easily sourced with a simple Google search. Jones claims that Lik’s *Phantom* “lazily emulates what others have done before”, and adds, “it is a cliché: easy on the eye, easy on the brain, hackneyed and third-hand.”

![Fig. 7: Ancestors, 2013, Gavin Hardcastle, Web Sourced Digital Image, (actual size undisclosed).](image)

To put this in terminology expounded by the seminal semiologist Roland Barthes, Jones is saying Lik’s *Phantom* lacks a *punctum*, meaning it is without poignancy. Barthes considered that images such as this “provoke only a general… polite interest… invested with… unconcerned desire… and inconsequential taste”\(^{vi}\). Since Barthes wrote this, there has arguably been a sharp proliferation of these photographs, which are proportionally aligned to the increasing level of automation in “quality” cameras. Ansel Adams was somewhat prophetic when he made the statement, “The sheer ease with which we can produce a superficial image often leads to creative disaster.”\(^{vii}\) Compounding Adams’ concerns, landscape can be less esoteric than other photographic genres, and practitioners of any ilk can try their hand at embellishment to make their image more “artistic”. We only need look at the
popularity of High Dynamic Range (HDR), which, when invariably taken too far, makes the image less realistic, in favour of a more “painterly” effect.

Ultimately most people in the market for landscapes are predictably more interested in beautiful photographs that don’t challenge them, or create any sense of unease. People are less likely to want more confronting landscape images in their homes, which are genuinely evocative, in that they stir poignant emotions about the state of the environment. My image titled *Wave Rock* (Fig. 8), for example, fits this latter concern. Also representing an expanse of natural rock, but depicting a substantially more human and less divine intervention, its social commentary stands it in direct contrast to Lik’s more commercially driven intentions.

![Wave Rock](image)

*Fig. 8: Wave Rock, 2015, Jamie Holcombe, Digital Photographic Print, 100x150cms.*

Such images invariably cross over into the realm of social documentary, observing the human condition and its impact on the landscape. These photographs can perhaps be defined as what the International Centre of Photography once called, “pictures that say, ‘look at what has been done to this landscape’, rather than, ‘look at what this landscape is’.” By recording the people in their circumstance, and the
happenings around them, social documentary photography ultimately archives a *social landscape* of a culture and its environment.

An important document by a 20th century travelling photographer, and an exemplar of social documentary, can be seen in Swiss-born Robert Frank’s *The Americans*, published in 1958. *The Americans*, which depicts Frank’s famous ten thousand mile road trip across America in the mid 1950s, is a photo-essay that revealed a clearly personal, even idiosyncratic view of America. His photographs of alienated, lonely Americans engaged in banal activities in the most ordinary public settings were essentially glimpses of an American sadness and disenchantment. The renowned curator of photography John Szarkowski once observed: “*This book... was about whole segments of life that nobody had thought [were] the proper concern of art*” ix

Many viewers did not like what they saw because they were reacting to Frank’s essentially melancholic interpretation that simply cut too close to the bone, disclosing what they had not wanted to see about themselves. Stripping away the gloss that we tend to perhaps subconsciously apply to our environment can be challenging, as we are exposed to the fine detail of our own space more as it is, than as we’d like it. Frank was an unwelcome witness, and his book challenged the way Americans saw themselves, and depicted a social landscape underpinned by sadness.

In his introduction to *The Americans*, writer Jack Kerouac clearly senses a melancholic tone in the photographs, stating that Frank “*sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film*” ix, which Susan Sontag later described in her seminal text *On Photography* (1977) as “*a mournful vision of loss*” xi. One of Frank’s images in *The Americans*, titled *Santa Fe, New Mexico* (Fig. 9), speaks fluently to this “mournful vision”. It depicts several petrol bowers of an otherwise unseen service station, with a view that spans across the road to the rural-like landscape beyond. The looming “SAVE” sign is broadcast against the sky, and is far too considered an element of the composition to suggest anything but an irony in Frank’s vision.
My photograph, titled *Beyond the Bowser* (Fig. 10), presents a lone petrol bowser at a recently defunct service station, which is flanked by an eclectic gathering of related paraphernalia, all poised at the edge of abandonment. As in Frank’s *Santa Fe*, the service station itself is not present in the photograph; instead the view looks away to the countryside beyond, and is similarly filtered by man-made artifacts. The presence of this debris of modern civilisation has much in common with writer Jonathon Day’s observations of Frank’s *Santa Fe*, in that such objects are “*the detritus of civilization*”. Day submits that such objects create a disharmony with the environment, and may eventually take on a bizarre mystery as to their original purpose, similar to prehistoric monuments like Stonehenge.
These photographs combine social documentary with an account of the artefacts of humankind, thus depicting the man-made environment within the natural environment. They are ultimately urban landscapes, affected by our civic intervention. (The term “civic” here is intended to imply a civilised collective, and importantly, one that might be equally accountable for its failures as for its successes). They also have no people in them, but they nonetheless primarily allude to human presence, and their mark, as in their structures and remnants that sit on, rather than in the landscape. Just as a traditional landscape often favours beautiful or natural scenery, an urban landscape is inherently comprised of human impact or intervention on the landscape and environment. Thus the urban landscape, by concentrating on cultural events and human-made artefacts, effectively becomes a virtual civic landscape.

The compulsion to “SAVE” in Frank’s Santa Fe is also present my Stop, Revive, Survive (Fig. 11), which lifts its title from a sign crudely fastened to a desperate-looking tree just outside the mining township of Iron Knob in South Australia. The sign is recommending passing motorists take a break at the nearby roadhouse, but it
takes on additional meaning elucidated by the familiar catch phrase, which in this context becomes an all but defeated plea. The irony here stems from the background, which bears the panoramic scar of 135 years of mining, which reduced the height of Iron Knob by more than 150 metres.xiii With the human-made decimation of the original landscape behind, the decrepit nature of the sign seems appropriate and reflective of our impact.

Many mines, including Iron Knob, also produce tailings, which are the leftover materials once the ore has been extracted. Also known as mullock heaps, meaning “worthless material”, these piles of tailings appear to symbolise a natural life-death-life cycle that has been arrested. The cycle becomes a linear process, a life simply brought to a finite conclusion by an interminable death. Even when we put the pros and cons of the mining debate aside, there is something melancholic about a mountain of worthless, dead dirt. This seems especially so when it overlooks an inhabited environment, as is eloquently evidenced by Shaun O’Boyle’s photograph titled Tailings Pile, Shamokin (Fig. 12), of a coal-mining town in Pennsylvania USA.
The alteration of any urban environment, be it by natural disaster or “progress”, or by vast or relatively small changes, can have an emotional effect on its inhabitants. This is because we develop an emotional attachment to our surroundings, which, returning to the earlier discussion, transforms indifferent spaces into connected places. Urban landscapes become a repository for our social memories, and as Delores Hayden writes in *The Power of Place* (1997), “decades of ‘urban renewal’ and ‘redevelopment’ of a savage kind have taught many communities that when the urban landscape is battered, important collective memories are obliterated”.xiv

Australian academic Glenn Albrecht has developed his own phraseology to create a language of comprehension for our emotional response to these effects on our surrounding environments. His key term for the emotions people experience when their environments are disrupted is *solastalgia*, which is based on the idea that we lose “solace” in our home environments and subsequently suffer anguish through the

Fig. 12: *Tailings Pile, Shamokin, PA*, 2010, Shaun O’Boyle, Digital Photograph.
“trauma, distress, grief and melancholia connected to environmental change”.xv

Albrecht’s terminology applies to the effects on our own environments, the places we call home, but could span well beyond our town or region, or even our country. In the case of climate change, for example, or even the Global Financial Crisis, home is the entire world; planet earth. Artist Laura Glusman has more wide-ranging motivations, which explore our insistence on ignoring the forces of nature. She writes, “the concept of landscape is not an isolated portion of land that exists only to be contemplated, but [is] a being imprinted with the traces of culture, storms, commerce and climate change”.xvi

My photograph titled Mandurama Storm (Fig. 13) is underpinned by a similar sentiment. It depicts an anonymous building behind a non-descript façade in the main street of a small town. It is of unknown purpose, but appears to be a former business. There are signs that it may now be inhabited as a residence, such as a garden-style gate over the original front door, and a television antenna protruding from atop the fibro structure behind. A single line still connects the building to the grid via the adjacent power pole, which frames the space above with its web of electrical cables. As a fierce storm approaches, a last shaft of sunlight casts an ominous shadow of a cross, which is mimicked by designs in the façade itself. But it is not of any ethereal origin, and is instead caused by another man-made power pole. This building, which suggests a battening down of the hatches, preparing for the inevitable storm, could be anywhere, and is everywhere in regional Australia.
Such images perhaps imply our relative insignificance to our environment, as if to remind us that man-made climate change will not destroy the planet, only our chances of survival on it. However some of us are not seemingly affected by Albrecht’s solastalgia on a holistic or global level, thus what happens in places other than our own locality is distanced as other people’s environments. This is reflected in the fact that, since Du Camp documented Egypt we have long been captivated by images representing ruin and decay. Naomi Stead writes that this intrigue might be due to the ambiguity of ruins, being part building and part nature, but also “their unique value as physical manifestations of the destructive effects of time, and thus as representations of history itself.” xvii

We live in a time of rapid change, which in turn manifests a new kind of ruin, one that is not always easy to recognise. This fascination with the ruin now bears witness to a relatively new phenomenon, commonly referred to as the modern ruin. Modern ruins can be in a process of decay for numerous reasons, sometimes because structures are built to a price point rather than built to last, sometimes because technology has rendered a purpose-built building obsolete, and sometimes because
economic pressures have forced closure. Arguably the most substantial collection of modern ruins can be found in the US city of Detroit. Indeed the city itself is commonly referred to as a modern ruin, and has become a major attraction for photographers. One of the most accomplished bodies of work depicting the city is *Detroit Disassembled* (2009) by Andrew Moore. His interior photographs, such as *Ballroom, Lee Plaza Hotel* (Fig. 14), are particularly powerful, and give the greatest demonstration of the opulent height from which the city has fallen.

![Fig. 14: Ballroom, Lee Plaza Hotel, 2009, Andrew Moore, Chromogenic Print, 150x120cms.](image)

Other reasons for a location becoming a modern ruin can be due to cultural and technological changes, as well as economic shifts in the way we access or consume entertainment. The drive-in theatre for example, as seen in *Dubbo Drive In* (Fig. 15),
has become a highly visible modern ruin, which evidences a public display of a culture all but lost within a generation. Huge cacti, now rampant, surround the perimeter's high and equally impenetrable barbed fence. Originally planted to impede access to non-paying viewers, the cacti no longer have anyone to deter. But this image is not simply a historical document, because if we look to other places in the world, such as China, it becomes a glimpse of an equally sad future. Along with the booming urbanisation of China and its sprawling American-style orientation towards the automobile, the drive-in cinema has been resurrected, with the first opening in Beijing in 1998. Numerous others have since opened in China, after virtually the last of them have closed down in countries like Australia and America.

Thus a photograph of a drive-in theatre in China is, arguably, potentially a document of a modern ruin in the making, one that is yet to happen. It seems that some cultural cycles are destined to repeat themselves, with some communities yet to encounter the lessons already learned by others, and to subsequently experience their own solastalgia.
Albrecht’s terminology refers to the condition of feeling displaced in our own environment, of feeling sad and powerless in the face of emotionally and physically destructive forces. In essence, it gives a name to the problem, but perhaps more importantly, he also has a word for the solution: *soliphilia*, which he defines as, “*the love of and responsibility for a place, bioregion, planet and the unity of interrelated interests within it*.”

In the end, Albrecht’s neologisms are only words, but they are intended to inspire action, appealing us to work together to protect and maintain our home environments, providing “*a universal motivation to achieve sustainability*.” My urban landscapes constitute my active contribution to this solution. They express my concern that we live too much in the shadow of fear and helplessness, needing to reclaim our relinquished responsibility for our own condition. Sometimes it takes a moment of melancholy to bring this to the fore, and to realise we are heading towards a demise of our own making. This is metaphorically depicted in *Coffin Bay* (Fig. 16), which suggests that the highway of denial of our ancient rhythms, which carves its way through nature’s own warnings, careers relentlessly towards the inevitable edge. But it is ultimately a positive experience, which can help bring balance to a disharmonious world.
LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

Fig. 16: Coffin Bay, 2015, Jamie Holcombe, Digital Photographic Print, 100x150cms.

6 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida (Great Britain: Fontana, 1984). p. 27.
(Accessed 18/11/2014)
(Accessed 18/11/2014)
xx Ibid.