

*Landscapes of Repair: the Role of Photography and
Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and
Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces*



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VISUAL ESSAYS

Where Fireflies Unfold

Oskar Alvarado

Abstract

Deleitosa is my village. It is located in the province of Cáceres, in the region of Extremadura in Spain. Here my parents, grandparents, great grandparents and other ancestors were born, going back through centuries of family genealogy. Deleitosa was the village that Eugene Smith chose to realize in his photographic essay "Spanish Village" that was published in the American magazine *Life* on April 9, 1951.

Far from showing the perceptible appearance of Deleitosa or some of the visual references linked to what was a photographic icon of the social and economic backwardness in Spanish rural society, my gaze has some subjective nuances linked to a series of experiences, places and personal memories. Reminiscences that have endured as apparitions in my memory. Images that intermingle episodes that float in my imagination with the new realities that coexist in the village.

There is an emotional need to reflect on the territory of which we are part. To explore our identity in the echo of the places that still speak to us, or in the absence–presence of the people and beings that inhabit them. To form a visual interpretation that evokes the mystery that manifests itself in everyday rhythms, in the poetic condition that underlies the strange.

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Oskar Alvarado Born in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain. Oskar Alvarado is a visual artist currently living in Barcelona. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts at Basque Country University (UPV), a MA on Curatorial and Cultural Practices in Art and New Media at Higher School of Design (ESDI) in Barcelona and a Graduate Diploma in Management, Preservation and Dissemination of Photographic Archives at Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona (UAB).

His photographic work has been exhibited at the Instituto Cervantes in Belgrade (Serbia), National Museum of Helsinki (Finland), Fotonoviembre Atlántica Colectivas (Spain), Photo Israel (Israel), Archivo Histórico Provincial de Cáceres (Spain), Verzasca Foto Festival (Switzerland), Addis Foto Fest (Ethiopia), Solar Foto Festival (Brazil), BFoto Festival (Spain), Angkor Photo Festival or Voies Off Awards (France) among others.

At the same time, his work has been recognized in awards such as Sarajevo Photography Festival, Kolga Tbilisi Photo Award, Gomma Photography Grant, Photometria International Photography Festival, The Prefix Prize, Photo Collective Stories, Festival Images Gibellina, OpenWalls Arles, Flow Photofest, Lucie Foundation Fine Art Scholarship, Santiago Castelo International Photography Award, Life Framer Photography Award, Helsinki Photo Festival, Art Photo Bcn or Restart Lithuanian Photographers Association and awarded with the Fujifilm Photography Grant at XXIII Photography and Journalism Seminar of Albarracín.

To approach a visual narrative of a place over six years means accepting the interplay of changing forms. But am I the same person who started this journey? Even my shadow on that wall projects a silhouette transformed by the passage of time, where maturity invites me to shed the superficial layers of ephemeral personalities that make our journey through life easier.

The photo essay in which Eugene Smith immortalized Deleitosa served as a catalyst, prompting numerous photographers to make pilgrimages to the village, perhaps seeking to perpetuate the visual essence of the LIFE magazine article, which still lingered twenty years later due to the region's slow socioeconomic progress. Maintaining a documentary spirit, they emphasized the enduring image of those original photographs, which the media had presented and which the magazine's readers, unfamiliar with the area, accepted as a representation. The residents of Deleitosa, however, were less so, and their varied opinions on the article suggested that there were other, less biased interpretations of the village.

The series *Where Fireflies Unfold* avoids focusing on the perceptible appearance of Deleitosa or any of the visual references associated with what was once a photographic icon of social and economic backwardness in rural Spain.

The key difference between this project and the occasional photojournalistic visits undertaken during the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of this one is that I've spent many seasons there since childhood, which gives me a very intimate connection with the town. This means that my perspective, while not strictly social documentation, possesses certain subjective nuances linked to a series of experiences, places, and memories that nourish my imagination.

To this end, I established a ritual of movement in search of visual fragments that would form a coherent visual whole. I've revisited most of the town's streets, spaces, and surrounding areas time and again during the years of the project's development. I've meticulously observed the private corners of my family's environment. The first impression a recurring place gives you is usually shaped by the things you like to look at, and each time you return to that spot, you confirm that the aspect, shape, or object that attracts you is still there. You have to discard this readily apparent image to delve beneath its ritualistic veneer of the habitual. Beneath it emerges the unusual, the unsignified.

In this context, mentioned earlier, of changing forms that are perceived when revisiting the same spaces in different eras, the first revealing evidence points to how certain elements of rural architecture, rooted in nature, especially on the periphery of these small settlements of barely 700 inhabitants where adaptation to the natural environment and functionality prevail, are often ephemeral in existence.

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Not only because their forms can be modified, deteriorate, or even disappear due to environmental impact, or because certain places, after a certain time, are no longer accessible for capturing the image from the same perspective, but also because, in combination with these factors, the very incidence of light, natural or artificial, at a given moment bestows upon the space a unique, fleeting, and ephemeral singularity. This situation makes us aware that sometimes we only have one opportunity to record a space in the best possible way—the way whose representation grants the maximum expressive and symbolic weight within the context of the narrative.

This has been one of the main motivations: to connect in some way with those mental images that represent those episodes lived in the town, those that have remained latent to a greater or lesser degree in my memory and that come to me recurrently. Along with this, there is also the need to explore our identity in the echo of the places that still speak to us or in the absence of the people and beings that inhabit them. To revisit these spaces, to project myself into them and try to perceive the subtle changes that may have occurred in the town. Or simply to allow myself to be surprised by whatever, as I pass by, emits subtle signals that can activate my capacity for evocative abstraction.

Another piece of evidence is how we position ourselves in relation to these spaces. How we amplify their scale or diminish their presence depending on how they resonate within us. We decontextualize their appearance, prioritizing the human factor. It's a matter of examining whether, throughout these years of creative process, our personal evolution has also changed the way we see. And how this new perspective connects with other possible visual and mental scenarios. Reminiscences that have lingered like apparitions in my memory. Images that intertwine episodes floating in my imagination with the new realities that coexist in the town.

One of the main premises in my work is to stage strangeness. Situations out of context, which suggest more than they tell, and which are presented as open works, ready for the viewer's reading and interpretation. My intention lies in evoking mystery. The mystery hidden in everyday rhythms, in the poetic quality that underlies the strange. Ultimately, my intention is to give a seemingly unremarkable place like my town that magic that every place possesses and that can emerge through a search connected with oneself.

Bibliography

Smith, W. Eugene and Luce, Henry R. 1951. "Spanish Village". *Life Magazine*, April 9.

[Fig. 1-10]

Where Fireflies Unfold



















