

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



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Photographing the altered identity of landscapes

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"As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. A description of [the city] as it is today should contain all [the city's] past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the bags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls."¹

Italo Calvino

The use of photography as a research tool and as an artistic form of expression to represent landscapes involves the challenge of representing their physical, cultural, social, and political marks, as well as their identity and perceptual singularity as a place. Landscapes represent territories which were transformed by human action and, as such, reveal an understanding and a set of values of past and present societies, witnessing the various (trans)formations of space – natural and artificial space – in line with article 5, a. of the *European Landscape Convention of the Council of Europe*, the landscape represents an "essential component of the human environment, an expression of diversity of its common and natural heritage and a base for its identity".

According to Lefebvre in "La production de l'espace" (1974), one way of conditioning social reproduction is through economic and political restrictions on access to space, therefore it is vital to draw attention to how landscapes are being (trans)formed, conditioned and controlled, so significantly. In an era that is deeply marked by climate change, as well as restrictions on actions and freedom of movement caused by the compulsory confinement arising from the current COVID-19 pandemic, several processes of social reproduction have occurred 'in' the changing landscape and are derived 'from' it. At the very limit, the restriction of access to a space, that is, the absence of human transformation, also results in an altered landscape, establishing a principle of causality. Photography thus has the ability to represent the identity of an altered landscape, through a documentary record, and to be an undeniable testimony of the human presence or absence in that principle of causality. In fact, if it is true that *to alter* means *to cause change* – that is, it presupposes a nexus of cause and effect – it is also true that it means *to disturb* or *falsify* – that is, it presupposes an action or omission, more or less harmful – provoking a strong or violent change. At the very limit, the landscape on a metamorphosis that is not biological or evolutionary, but rather of transmutation, where the landscape that originated it is transformed into something else.

¹ Italo Calvino, *Cidades Invisíveis* (Lisboa: Editorial Teorema, 2003), 14–15. transl. by the author.

The work "Replacing urban identity: the disappearance of Sha'biya Al Safa Neighborhood" by Luca Donner and Francesca Sorcinelli documents the transformation of a social and urban historical identity in the city of Dubai, by the eradication of a relational and phenomenological system, by the disruption of a sense of neighbourhood that is represented through everyday landscapes of the private sphere and urban landscapes of the public sphere, as a consequence of the demolition of a poor neighbourhood for appropriation by a wealthy social group. A clean slate applied over an urban space that was a result of the national housing policies in the 1960s and 1980s, created by the founder of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. It represents a deep-rooted community identity, unveiled and captured by its traditional architectural and typological elements, disturbed and altered to make way for a new neighbourhood, a new something else, without a trace of life.

To the question initially launched in this panel, "How can we understand landscapes and their identity in the contemporary transformation processes resulting from the dynamics of change and disrupting habits of our societies?", Ana Roberti, Helena Santos and Daniel Brandão answered with an interesting approach, both scientific and artistic, of ethnographic study, through an imagery that is capable of registering and documenting the transformations that occurred during the rehabilitation process of the social housing neighbourhood Rainha Dona Leonor in Porto, resulting from the demolition of five housing blocks for the construction of a single block. Such as in the previous work, photography records altered identities of the landscape, through social, cultural, and urban narratives that become perceptible by capturing their imprints.

In a world where changes occur at an overwhelming speed, photography allows for a sequential record, witnessing the altered identity of the landscape as it (trans)forms and (con)forms itself, and as it happens in *The Garden of Forking Paths* (Borges, 2003), its purpose will only be understandable to us in the last image.