

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



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Where the Dust Has Settled

by Jesús Vassallo

The Spanish word *Despoblado*, aptly describes Iñaki Bergera's last photographic series. It translates rather directly in English as *depopulated*, but its rich Spanish etymology also alludes to the process of unravelling of a human settlement. Fittingly, the images present us with the reality of the abandoned villages in the hillsides of the Spanish Pyrenees. These are ruins of small hamlets, made up of stone cottages carefully clustered together, each of them hugging the topography of the site and collectively forming patterns that are a direct translation of the rural modes of production that made them possible.

The images are crisp and calm, and as always with Bergera, the approach is a hybrid between the documentary impulse of topographic photography, and the careful depiction of space more typical of professional architectural photography. More specifically in this case, there seems to be a strong division of labor, with orthographic aerial images that capture the layout of each group of buildings with Cartesian precision, and a series of subjective shots in which the interior and interstitial spaces of the structures are portrayed carefully and lovingly at eye level, as if they were still in use.

The photographs of these taut and efficient stone buildings are striking today, perhaps because of the sharp contrast between their state of neglect and the way in which they embody some of the qualities that we have come to cherish and aspire to in contemporary construction. In an age when the most progressive architects and builders are focusing on zero carbon, locally sourced, durable construction, these houses and barns stand as exemplary. More so, in the middle of a wave of regained attention to the countryside, made only more acute by the Covid pandemic and our exacerbated longing for open space and nature, these husks of buildings portrayed by Bergera seem to contain the promise of a better tomorrow.

In fact, one recurring thought when studying the photographs is the sheer potential accumulated in physical form in these buildings, just standing there, waiting to be activated. One cannot help but wonder if places such as these are primed for rebirth, just a few decades after sinking into oblivion, or if nature will be allowed to continue uninterrupted with the slow and steady work of swallowing back what human drive and stubbornness so painstakingly erected out of its entrails. Bergera's images teeter precisely in that sharp edge, forcing us to ponder the drama, to wonder if these places are gone for good, or just about to welcome the new pair of hands that will restore them to life.

Nostalgia, inevitable in this type of photography, plays a large role in these images. Bergera's photographs, however, steer away from the genre of ruin porn, despite ruination being their very subject matter. The approach here is not morbid but somehow optimistic, the effect of the images soothing. This is not a thriller, not there is not too much room in the series for the petty traces of human life, small trinkets collecting dust on a table just as they were left suddenly when the site was abandoned. The focus is, I believe, in the different degrees to which the architecture is devolving into nature. In some frames, the interiors look almost fully functional, a broom and some new windows all that is required to bring the spaces back into use. In other images however, walls in advanced stages of decay start to intermingle with vegetation, spilling some of their stones into the surrounding fields, their edges blurring as they soften back into a geometry that is more geological than architectural.

As a counterbalance to the romanticism of some of the eye-level views, the aerial drone images display an enhanced degree of abstraction and coolness, as they capture the layout of each of the hamlets in its totality. By acting as an index and introduction to the documentation of the buildings in each grouping, the aerial photographs ground the series into documentary territory, providing internal structure and clarifying that this is a photographic project that goes beyond a subjective *dérive*.

In their topographic exactness, the aerial photographs reveal the intricate way in which these settlements adapted to the terrain around them and how they were in actuality just moments of increased intensity within larger networks of exploitation and material transformation of the land. In the drone footage we appreciate how the roofs have caved in and disappeared, presenting us with the photographic equivalent of an architectural plan drawing. All the structural walls are exposed by a sort of x-ray vision and we behold an almost perfect Nolli plan of each of these settlements, allowing us in turn to understand the very logical and pragmatic principles followed in their construction.

Despite the fact that time seems to have been arrested in Bergera's photographs, their relevance is due precisely to the fact that they document a process of transformation of the built environment. In the tradition of topographic photography, it is precisely when the world around us is transforming more violently, when the processes at play escape our understanding due to their sheer scale and complexity that we most need images to try and make sense of the situation.

In that regard, this series of images helps us think about our moment in time, in which the transfer of population from the countryside into the cities is entering its final acceleration at the exact same time that we are rediscovering the rural environment as a necessary reservoir and counterbalance to our urbanized environments. After many decades of gradual shifting of the populations from farms and villages into ever-growing metropolises, a process that is only becoming more acute in developing economies around the globe, we start to wonder precisely how to organize our presence in the territory and how to make sense of the rural/urban spectrum in a more balanced way. Our economy and our politics, our long-term welfare, demand the redistribution of the human, cultural, and literal capital.

Certainly, Bergera's visual essay helps us ask all the difficult questions. Where should we be investing our energies? How do we, as a culture, assign value to the built environment? Is it time to hedge our bets or is hyper-density the only way towards a sustainable planet? At a different level, the images also force us to wonder where their allure lies, and if it is not precisely the absence of people and their detritus that encapsulates their magic and renders them irresistible, a dream beyond our reach. Be it as it may, by focusing his lens diametrically opposed to the direction of progress and allowing us to dwell where the dust has settled, Bergera manages to shake us out of our comfort zone while simultaneously offering up a space for reflection.