

INVISIBLE LANDSCAPES

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While Spain was turned upside down, while places lost their memory and reason for being, and landscapes lost their imagery; while the banalisation and trivialisation of our environment advanced without stopping and without seeming to bother anybody, some did not see or did not want to see, and some looked the other way... and a few perceived that something was happening, that a new landscape was emerging without us hardly realising. Among these last few was Jorge Yeregui, whose perceptive and sharp vision has deservedly received the acknowledgement of the Pilar Citoler International Contemporary Photography Award.

In effect, Jorge Yeregui's photographs, ordered in different series and structured proposals in the form of authentic research projects, perfectly reflect the transformation of urban spaces, the vertiginous growth of the real estate park, the squandering of a territory that is a scarce resource, diverse processes of gentrification (some of them failed), as well as the birth of new structures at the sides of the roads that enter (and exit) what only a few years ago were compact urban nuclei, with sharp borders that clearly delimited built-up and non built-up areas. The author also enters other registers, other topics, like the new natural spaces that *colonise* the city of the twenty-first century, normally in the form of plant topography (of *Eco-topographies*) only possible through the application of sophisticated technological processes, such as in the series *Minimal Landscapes*, not a very habitual topic in contemporary photography. I don't know many photographers who have dedicated themselves so deeply to the study of these fragments of pure artificial nature, a contradiction in terms.

In this book there is no series, no photograph, which leaves me impassive. They all awake emotions, they interrogate me, they unsettle me or arouse my curiosity: the bricked-up door of a house in an old urban quarter, not yet gentrified of any city, a reflection of the real estate hecatomb that carried forward thousands of small promoters who aimed to emulate on a small scale the large corporate holdings of the sector; a scrubland that has been capable of growing and surviving in the middle of the tarmac of an abandoned road, an image that reminds me of some

of the most memorable pages of J G Ballard, specifically those in the novel *Low-Flying Aircraft*, the ephemeral sales cabins of the real estate agents at the edge of the building site, which inevitably take me to the latest, excellent film by Mercedes Álvarez, *Mercados del Futuro* (Markets of the Future), or the unfinished architecture belonging to the recession landscape, which Julia Schultz-Dornburg has recently documented in *Modern Ruins: A Profitable Topography*, the second book from the excellent collection *Word and Landscape* from publisher Àmbit from Barcelona. Through these and other themes, Jorge Yeregui opens the wound of what has been the transformation of the peninsular territory in these recent years. He synthesises in images the essence of this process, of this collective loss of a sense of place, which is not in any way easy. There is a similar skill (and not very frequent) held by some geniuses of comic strip and cartoon, such as *El Roto*, for example, capable of transmitting with only a few strokes a deep social, as well as territorial problem, as is the case of *El Roto*.

I don't want to go into the details of the causes that have led to this unstoppable dilapidation of the national territory and the degradation of its landscapes. They are known to everybody: weak democratic structures that have easily and avidly succumbed to corruption; a certain disdain towards public space, a fatal legacy of Francoism, a lack of territorial culture of the majority of the political class and the general population; cheap money and excessive ease in obtaining credit provided by an irresponsible and usurer financial sector, the short-sightedness of governors for not opting at the right time for productive economic sectors with a high added value, the chronic deficit of local corporations to offer the resources and services that citizens demanded, huge bags of black money that floated to the surface with the introduction of the euro and were easily laundered in the building industry, depraved confusion between the real estate business and the tourism business, the culture of the *nouveau riche* etc. etc. These and other causes have led us to the bottomless pit in which we now find ourselves and doubtlessly will take time in emerging from. But, I insist, I do not want to go deeper into these matters now. Instead, I want to reflect on the landscape that has fallen on top of us as a result of those matters, specifically, the post-battle landscape, the one found upon opening our eyes to the reality surrounding us after having emerged from this collective amnesia in which we have been immersed for too many years.

That this so familiar recession has generated a new landscape is an obvious fact. A recession landscape exists no matter where we look. The urban and architectural remains are found everywhere, whether in the form of a palm grove of petrified cranes on the Mediterranean coast, or captured among dozens of urbanisations

spread out across the country, with their waste grounds and deserted roads travelled by nobody. Recession landscapes are also all those tourist promotions that have been left by the wayside, such as half-built ski stations (and not specifically because of the effect – yet – of climate change), not to mention ghost airports situated in the middle of nowhere, scattered across the geography of the peninsular. Landscapes that are surreal in many senses, horrifying in others. Desolated landscapes and, in some cases, cinematographically speaking, even apocalyptic. In some of these urbanisations, the first scrublands threaten and the naked pillars of reinforced concrete submitted to the inclemency of several hot summers and cold winters are turning from their original pale grey colour to a darker grey that brings to mind the colour of mourning. Besides, these already form part of our daily urban landscape and start to make an impression on our memories, in our collective imagery. Who knows... perhaps the first Spanish archaeological park of incomplete construction is not so far away, the first open air museum of neglect and abandonment.

Jorge Yeregui uses the term *pre-ruins* to refer to this unfinished and abandoned architecture that openly show their basic structure, their skeleton, and that are halfway between sculpture and architecture. Yes, in effect, they are *pre-ruins* in the sense that they are buildings that haven't had the opportunity to exercise the function for which they were designed, given that they never reached culmination. They remained half-built, for which they will never be ruins of something or anything, as this *something* never existed. However, with the passage of time – and as a kind of re-naturalisation advances on them, for as elemental as it may be – they also acquire the aspect of ruins although, without a doubt, they will always be *ruins without splendour*. Ruins with capital letters, ruins with character, were, in their day, constructions that had a use for many years, for centuries, and that, later, collapsed or were destroyed, but always conserved the essence of what they were. Moreover, their simple presence today legitimises a culture on converting them into a tangible sample and evidence of their remote origins in the past. They become concrete evidence of the survival and solidity of a past culture in the present, for which they are viewed with respect and admiration. Immortalised by history and paint and, more recently, by photography and contemporary cinematography, they have entered and occupied a preferential place in our collective imagery. These are ruins *with splendour*.

How far from them are the fragile and ephemeral half-built sheds and warehouses that appear in the series *On the Way* by Jorge Yeregui! To these could be added thousands of semi-detached houses that will never be occupied, abandoned

commercial warehouses, half-ruined electricity pylons, swimming pools that have never been filled with water, roads which nobody drives on, urbanised and deserted road networks... all in all, endless buildings, constructions and infrastructures that have been left without a use, that have lost their reason for being (in fact, they never got to *be* anything). Ruins without splendour, artefacts without soul, mutes in a territory in which they exist without being, already almost invisible, opaque, every day further from our non-resistant vision, that cannot stand the aesthetics of desolation. Mute witnesses of a too recent past and a too fleeting future. Ruins *with splendour*, fully integrated in the spatial order, legitimised by power, transmit to us the sublime, nobility and beauty in capital letters. The ruins described here, a crystal clear expression of the spatial disorder inherent in brutal capitalism, can only aspire to their small instant of glory in the precise moment we stop to contemplate them, to feel them. It is then when they awake in us, albeit in small doses, nostalgia and melancholy. The melancholy of decline, the sadness of abandonment.

The seriousness of this process reflected so well in Jorge Yeregui's series is not only the evident hypertrophy of these urban promotions, but their location, almost always set away from the compact urban nucleus, which is generating high environmental, maintenance and transport costs, as well as having provoked the appearance of countless empty spaces, unoccupied, apparently free; spaces without any clear function in the new territorial framework. They appear to be a no man's land, territories without direction or personality, stripped as they are of their original character, of their reason for being, in a territory that has ceased to exist. They are undetermined spaces, with imprecise limits, of uncertain uses, expectant, on occasion, hybrids of what they have ceased to be and what they do not know if they will ever be. They are *terrains vagues*, strange places that seem condemned to a type of exile, especially now it is clear they will never be the same as before and that, as such, the calculated speculation manoeuvres linked to these interstitial spaces will never play out. If they do, they will not generate the capital gains previously hoped for.

Why did only a few people see what was happening? Why was this evident loss of identity of place only perceived by a few? Many, a lot, looked the other way, as we said above. But the vast majority simply looked but did not see anything. Yes, it is that simple. And this is for several reasons. Firstly, because our vision, like everything in this life, is educated, and our society is not sufficiently educated from a territorial, environmental and landscape point of view. That anecdote, told on more than one occasion by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, comes to

mind: a father promises his son, who has never seen the sea, that he will take him and show it to him. Finally the day arrives and the boy, standing on the beach, mute, incapable of saying a single word for several minutes due to the immensity he sees before his eyes, asks his father, 'Father, show me how to look at the sea.' Vision is educated, in effect. Because of this it is so important to contemplate the world that surrounds us, that is to say, to look with attention, in a relaxed though not less attentive way. It is then when our brain goes beyond purely visual perception and adds to the act of looking aesthetic, intellectual and emotional components among many others. It is then when we learn, when we become conscious of the act of looking. From there comes the enormous relevance of having an education system capable of incentivising observation, contemplation, that is to say, cultivating our vision.

There is also another reason that explains this surprising collective short-sightedness, and it is to do with the fact that landscape, in the background, is a social construction. The idea we have of landscape reflects a certain way of organising and experiencing the visual order of geographic objects in a territory. Landscapes are built socially, and diverse factors intervene in this process. Often we only see the landscape *we want* to see, that is, those that do not question our idea of landscape, socially constructed. In the landscape we search for those aesthetic models we have in our minds, or those that are closest to them. Because of this we are surrounded by *invisible* landscapes that we do not see, simply because we are not prepared to look at them. They are, for example, the landscapes of dense broken territories, of the urban and metropolitan environments that have lost a good part of their territorial discourse and their habitual landscape imagery. They are landscapes that alternate with discontinuity, interstitial terrains, barren and abandoned, precarious warehouses, unfinished buildings which at first divide unending waste ground. It is not easy to integrate a clear and comprehensible discursive logic to the broken and vague territories of these hybrid landscapes and to borders that seem wandering, nomadic, not because they move, but because they are recurrent, they are repeated everywhere. Their difficult legibility increases their invisibility. It is important to emphasise this fact during moments in which the sensation of divorce between the landscapes we imagine and those which we live has incremented notably. In effect, the abyss between the landscapes that we contemplate on a daily basis and the referential landscapes transmitted from generation to generation through such diverse ways as landscape painting, photography, text books and the media is greater every day. We are witnessing a type of crisis of representation between referential landscapes that, in some cases, have become authentic archetypes and real, day to day landscapes, a crisis that finds its origin

in the invisibility and lack of legibility of many contemporary landscapes. We look for those models, those patterns, which adjust to those we have in our collective subconscious. For this reason, these highly transformed, outlying landscapes are invisible to the eyes of many of us.

And, however, there is nothing more fascinating than discovering new landscapes in our own daily environment. In the words of Marcel Proust, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes”. We have to educate our vision in such a way that we are capable of discovering new realities where everything seemed to be already explored. I think this is precisely what Jorge Yeregui has learnt throughout his fruitful career: to look with other eyes at daily landscapes. And his vision, although centred on the banal landscapes generated by the recent production systems and hegemonic consumption, is not apocalyptic, pessimistic or catastrophic. It simply bears witness to them and acts as a notary, which reinforces the message even more.