Beyond the Desert of the Real: Regenerative narratives in the cityscape

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Extended Abstract

This paper presents the results of the research-creation project **Beyond the Desert of the Real**, carried out at the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Architecture between 2009 and 2011. The project was funded by Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, with related work supported by the Manitoba Arts Council, the Winnipeg Film Group, and the National Film Board of Canada.

 Beyond the Desert addressed the dispersed North-American city through video, installation, and design proposition, engaging citizens in the interpretation of their city. The project engaged a diverse group of educators, students, spatial practitioners and community members. In distinct but overlapping phases, the participants documented dysfunctional urban spaces, experimented with their representation, and developed design propositions for them. The project's ambition was to develop new ideas for urban form through the nurturing of new cultural ecologies – negotiations between narrative, the material realities of the city, and design.

The project took as its departure point the observations of such cities by commentators Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord. Baudrillard famously applied the term *the desert of the real*[1] to the wastelands thrown up by North America's culture of simulation and consumption. In fact it was Guy Debord who had referred as early as 1960 to an urban desert created by modern systems of production: "outside the factory everything is organized as a desert (dormitory towns, freeways, parking lots...) — the terrain of consumption."[2] The late modern North American city is paradigmatic of that desert, and in many respects the city of Winnipeg is representative of this phenomenon.

But conditions today are not those of Debord's era: they are a complex new development of it. An intuition of the resonance between specifically contemporary conditions of media and today's dispersed urban form – fragmented, overdetermined in some respects, lacking in others – was a central impetus for this project. In this the project was informed by contemporary writers on media, for example Lev Manovich and Andreas Broeckmann, and Stephen Cairns' observations on the resonance between the late modern city and post-modern representations, which he presents in opposition to Kevin Lynch's conception of

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[1] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[2] Pierre Canjeurs [Daniel Blanchard] & Guy Debord, "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program", text dating from 20 July, 1960, Situationist International Online, http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/program.html.

the imageable city.[3] Cairns argues that the dispersed city defies attempts to render it imageable, coherent. If we are to understand it we must adopt what Debord might have termed anti-spectacular forms of imaging: low-cost, hand-held, on-the-ground. *Beyond the Desert of the Real* took the position that the ubiquitous media we use today to document and navigate the city play a crucial role in developing an emotive (rather than cognitive) urban map.

The project invited members of two social groups to document urban sites on video. One was composed of graduate students at the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Manitoba. In the context of seminars on architectural theory over the course of one year, thirty students shot films on a variety of devices from cell-phones to prosumer video cameras, and edited them in Final Cut Pro and Premiere Pro. The second group was made up of twenty adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, recent newcomers to the city. They were interviewed (in audio) about their experiences; a number of them shot footage of parts of the city they loved or hated, using cell phone and flip cameras, and their footage was edited into short (3 minutes or less) documentaries. Several of the participants were in effect members of both of these groups: newcomers to the city who had only recently taken up residence, for whom English was not their native tongue, yet who were studying architecture or city planning at the graduate level. So, while originally imagined as distinct, these segments of society intersected; and some of the most interesting work came from that intersection.
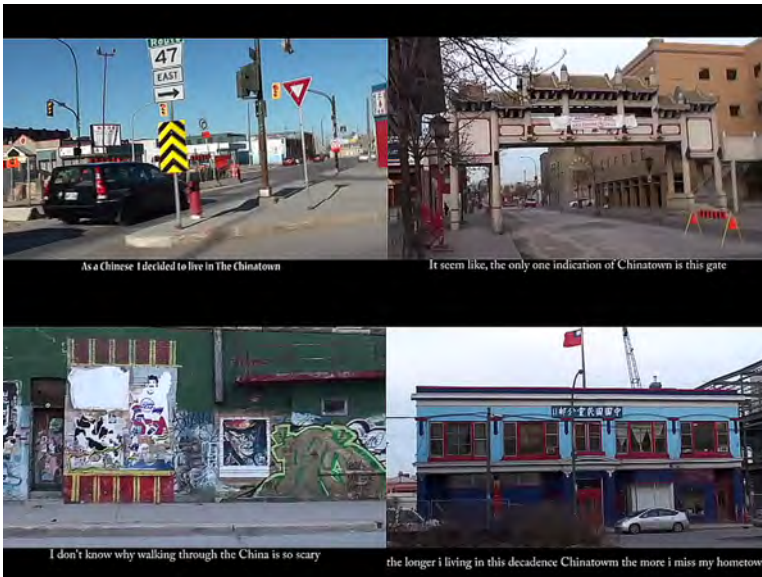
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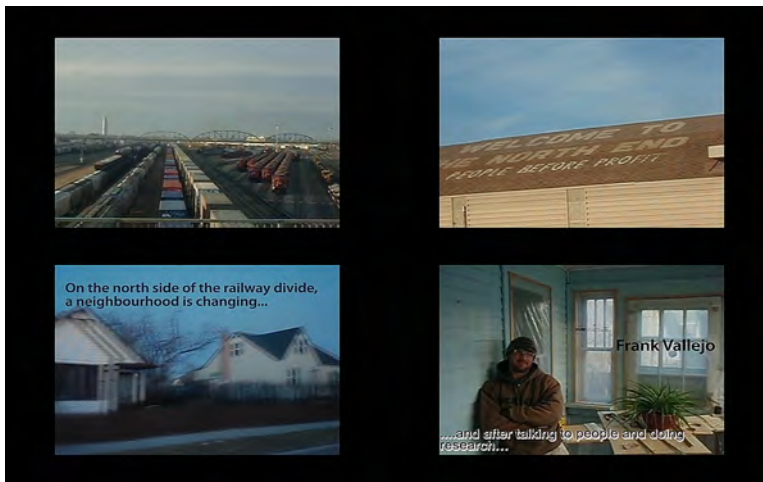
(courtesy Andy Puiatti © 2009)

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[3] Stephen Cairns, "Cognitive Mapping the Dispersed City," in *Urban Space and Cityscapes: Perspectives from Modern and Contemporary Culture*, edited by Christoph Lindner (London; New York: Routledge, 2006).

(courtesy Anca Matyiku © 2009)

(courtesy Zhi Yong Wang © 2009)

Taken as a whole the films traced a tension between the desolation of abandoned urban sites, the hollowness of the suburbs created to replace them, and the desires which produced both kinds of space. Many of the films articulated an affective response to non-places, understandable given the project's focus on broken parts of the city, and resonant with Gilles Deleuze's observations on the compelling affective quality of desolate and detached post-war spaces: *espaces quelconques* / *anyspaces whatever*.[4] These observations began to suggest as an alternative to Lynch's 'cognitive map', a cartography of affect.

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[4] That is, spaces which emerged in "the post-war situation with its towns demolished or being reconstructed, its waste grounds, its shanty towns, and even in places where the war had not penetrated, undifferentiated urban tissue, its vast unused places, docks, warehouses, heaps of girders and scrap iron." (Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 120-121) These spaces include

As an exploration of this, the visual narratives were integrated into a public, gallery-based installation, which reconstructed the city in the form of a partial and incomplete map. This took the form of the installation *éCartographies*, assembled at RAW:Gallery, in central Winnipeg. It was created in collaboration with curator Joe Kalturnyk and media artist Skot Deeming, and with the help of participants in a third graduate seminar in architectural theory.[5] Without erasing the differences between them, one intention was to bring together the image of the city and its material reality, or in Cairn's words, the "confluence of material and representational worlds." Trying to understand the gap between those worlds, a parallel exploration in theory drew on notions from Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As the map evolved, we began to see these worlds interpenetrating, slipping across the gap and back again in ebbs and flows of material and image. We also identified a specific contemporary corollary to the relationship between image and material: the gap between material and mediated realms, analogue and digital.

Over the course of one month, the interior of the gallery was turned into a fragmented urban map, built up through a process of accretion, weaving, and erasure of chalk lines, nylon cable, industrial hardware, and *objets trouvés* scavenged in and around the sites where our video narratives had been shot. The films were projected into this tangle of materiality and formed an inseparable yet distinct part of it. They now included not only the narratives shot in the first phase of the project, but also videos submitted by members of the public, including a number of independent filmmakers, in response to an open call for contributions. In the background of the installation was an ambient soundscape taken from the soundtracks of several of the films[6]. The whole formed simultaneously a map of Winnipeg and a screen within which incompatible modes of seeing and displaying the city were entangled. Gallery-goers were themselves absorbed into the installation, their own bodies acting as mobile screens as they drifted through, their shadows caught in the net of cords. As subjects, and bodies, they formed the final elements of this affective map.

representative images:

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the cities of North America and their post-war suburbs, with their profound erosion or abandonment of public space.

[5] The participants who built and contributed creatively to the installation were Nicholas Bell, Paulo Castillo, April David, Dustin Fanni-Sharrow, Nick Harasym, Evan Jameson, Matthew Trendota, and Souk Xoumphonphackdy.

[6] In particular the work of Pia Buus, Anca Matyiku, Andy Puiatti, and Aaron Simoes.

(Photography by the author and Jacqueline Young © 2011)

The third phase of *Beyond the Desert* fulfilled the project's ambition to engage not only with representation but also with design. In parallel with the preparation of *éCartographies*, a group of designers developed an urban design proposition targeting disused spaces in the city. The team included a local but increasingly global design firm, 5468796. They are recipients of several P/A and AR awards and curators, with Jae-Sun Chong, of Canada's contribution to the 2012 Venice Biennale. The team also comprised the author; and Jean Trottier, Assistant Professor in the University of Manitoba's Department of Landscape Architecture. Trottier's work concerns urban design, design history, and the role of technology in design thinking. The team focused on spaces identified in many of the video narratives: specifically, aging and redundant suburban roadways, the feeders of suburban sprawl and one of its characteristic morphologies. Such elements of infrastructure can be understood as fragments of Baudrillard's desert and

Deleuze's *espaces quelconques*; they played a role in *éCartographies* as already mentioned. Alan Berger would term them *drosscapes*.[7]

The propositions developed in this phase of the project engaged with the major social and ecological forces impacting on the city of Winnipeg: a population expected to burgeon by several hundred thousand in twenty years, mostly due to immigration (many of the EAL students involved in the first exploration of this project form part of this influx); an infrastructural deficit that makes further expansion of the city ill-advised and perhaps impossible; a global ecological crisis stemming from dependency on the automobile; and a need to create publically-available resources out of barren non-places, remediating waste infrastructure socially and ecologically. Wanting to engage with contemporary economic realities, the team also proposed a financial plan to leverage the value of underused space and fund development through public-private partnership. The proposal superimposed on the city's road infrastructure a pragmatic, disjunctive, complex, and urban landscape – one which might accommodate the complex and different subjects who inhabit our cities, and one which accepts and then twists inherited infrastructure as Berger suggests. It offered hybrids of public and private space, consistent with the blurring of the lines between home and work, publicity and privacy, characteristic of new media and social realities. And it applied an understanding of ecology based on complex environments to propose the reintroduction of prairie ecologies into the city, alongside urban farming.

representative image:

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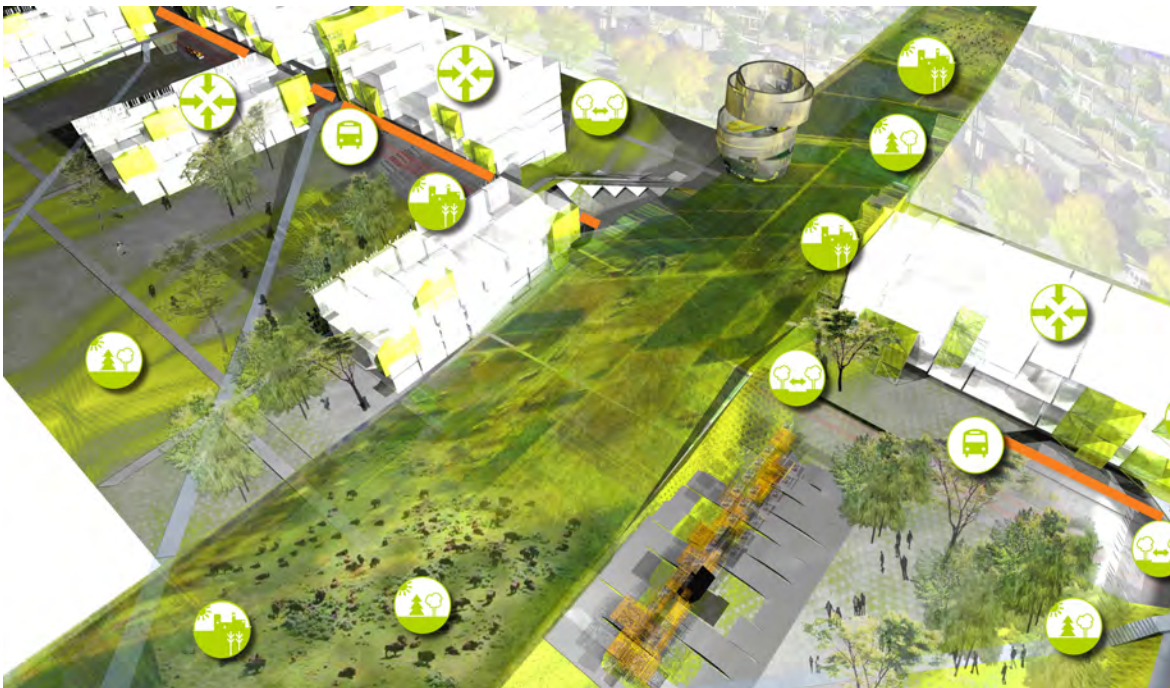
[7] Alan Berger, *Drosscape: Wasting Land in Urban America* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006).

This exploration thus went far beyond merely transferring the earlier representational research into urban form. It attempted a re-thinking of urban landscape concordant with the wide range of contemporary cultural and technological changes impinging on the city, to which contemporary media and its impact on the public realm are critical. The design and development approach implied a broader rethinking, one open to the (e)merging of not only place and non-place, private and public, but also deeper dichotomies. As Ilya Prigogine puts it: "What is now emerging is an 'intermediate' description of reality that lies somewhere between the two alienating images of a deterministic world and an arbitrary world of pure chance."[8] In urban terms, this calls for a landscape beyond the modern(ist) city whose divisions - of function from function, of private from public space – were a realization of an outdated mechanistic epistemology. One could add to this the dichotomies between art and science, creation and research.

While an original intention of the project was to develop new modes of imagining and representing the city to those used conventionally by architects, urban designers and planners, the project's most compelling result was probably the creation of venues for the presentation of distinct, oft-excluded, and qualitative viewpoints on the city. It also demonstrated that embedding urban representations in public space and alongside urban artifacts could create a compelling fusion of the city's imaginary and material dimensions. In this it rejected models of representation (for example Baudrillard's) which assert a replacement of materiality by the imaginary; rather, it aligned with notions of representation closer to that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Ultimately the project suggested that a broad understanding of theory of cities and of representation is called for if we are to avoid the traps of one approach or another, and create cities which accommodate diversity and develop resourcefulness.

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[8] Ilya Prigogine, *The End of Certainty* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 189, quoted in Berger, "Drosscape," 203.