Maggie Roe reports.

I have recently been reading Alan Thomas’s (1969) collection of Lawrence Durrell’s writings, many of which are about the Greek landscape, inspired by his life in the Mediterranean and Aegean islands. When I was asked to contribute to a PhD Summer School at the University of the Aegean on Lesvos, instead of taking the usual travel guide, I took this small book along. Of course the most famous piece of Durrell writing linked to this area of the world is ‘My Family and Other Animals’ written by Gerald Durrell, Lawrence’s younger brother. I still have the ancient and somewhat yellowed paperback edition of this, read more years ago than I care to try and remember. Many of the essays in the elder Durrell’s book have the same ability to impart the smells and sounds of the landscape, the character of the inhabitants, and to express the connections between landscape and people. As Thomas (1969) suggests, ‘it was not only the lyrical beauty of Corfu and the prismatic clarity of Greek light that appealed to Durrell; nor even the eternal legends handed down from classical times but intimately wedded to the landscape of today; there were qualities in the character of the modern Greeks themselves which struck deep chords with his own nature; so that Greece and the Greeks have formed one of the major influences on Durrell’s life and writing’ (p.27). The Durrells were not the only writers of this period whose works infused the spirit of the landscape within their own experiences of people and place; think of Patrick Leigh Fermor and Rose Macaulay, both of whom were visitors to the Durrell household. Dipping into Durrell’s book made me reflect that what seems to have been forgotten in the recent reporting of the Greek ‘problem’ is the astonishing richness and diversity of this landscape and the resilience of its people; a feeling that was only emphasised by my recent visit to Lesvos by reading the contributions in another, more recent, book edited by Thymos Papayannis and Peter Howard (2012).  

Lesvos is the third largest of the Aegean Islands and one of the most remote from the Greek mainland. It clings to the Turkish side of the Aegean with its strange amorphous outline and remarkable cultural landscape. Rocky slopes surround two large eutrophic lagoons and, as described on the field trip that was part of this PhD summer school, the extraordinary geological character and location, alongside the long term management of the landscape, has provided the conditions for the development of a rich ecology and the island’s role as a bird migration hotspot. Just from the bus, I saw storks, bee-eaters, flamingos, swallows and many other species.

The summer school was organised by Professor Theano Terkenli (Professor of Geography - Landscape, Cultural Geography and Tourism - at the University of the Aegean) and Professor Bas Pedroli (Senior Researcher at Alterra Wageningen UR and Associate Professor at Wageningen University Land Use Planning Group), under the auspices of the VOLANTE project (http://www.volante-project.eu/). The main VOLANTE partners met following the workshop, but bringing a number of experienced researchers and teachers to Lesvos for the meeting provided a wonderful opportunity to develop a PhD workshop associated with that group. The workshop sessions included insights from collaborative landscape planning projects in Denmark from Jorgen Primdahl, and a modelling workshop using interactive visioning computer-based methods with Joske Houtkamp from Alterra, the Netherlands. One would have thought the attraction of a week on a Greek island and a remarkable array of contributors would have meant this summer school would have been over-subscribed, however this was not the case. Perhaps this says more about the present financial difficulties of students around Europe and the relative remoteness of Lesvos than a lack of willingness to attend. However, a positive outcome of the small number of attendees meant that more attention could be given to those who did attend. The result allowed focussed discussion within a relaxed atmosphere; the good interaction which was certainly enjoyable from a lecturer’s point of view. I was asked to talk about developing and publishing scientific papers, based primarily on my experience as Editor of Landscape Research. I was greatly helped in thinking about this by speaking to past editors of the journal and other editors working on the Journal of Environmental Management and Planning (also published from Newcastle University). During the three days I attended the workshop, the students presented their own draft papers in sessions interspersed between those of the invited discussants. It was good to see such enthusiasm relating to this key area of landscape research (transitional landscapes or landscape change studies). We discussed a wide range of methods including quantitative landcover change investigations and qualitative models to examine social and cultural transitions. The subjects presented by students included the take-up...
After the canal, the rustle of water at the edge of the grass banks, the whisper of men and women sitting on benches in the gardens, the quiet of the town church. If the tuner were touching the keys of a piano, one after another in no particular order in a house a long way away. …

Sounds in an urban landscape: an evocation by Graham Greene 1935

England Made Me

A rocket spat and flared and failed to burst in the middle of the square. An empty switchback shot above the roofs and the waving flags of the building. The lights of the great concealed lights and saw the moths flock past to shrivel against the burning concave glasses. From pages 30-31 by Graham Green. Published by Penguin Books in association with William Heinemann Ltd 1935. A sound scene at the Tivoli Gardens, Stockholm.

BBC Radio 4 today (July 20th) ran an article on noises of summer with all windows open. Then what about the weather - cloud cover versus clear sky etc? Many questions, no immediate answers, but here I am ... surroundings as I am a ringer and therefore active on the end of a rope, rather than being able to listen outside.

Great hollow domes are seen in the eastern side of the rock, against which the Green (river) sweeps; willows border the river; clumps of box elder are seen; and a few cotton woods stand at the lower end. Standing opposite the rock, our words are repeated with starting clearness, but in soft mellow tone, that transforms them into magical music. Scarcely can one believe that it is the echo of one’s own voice. In some places two or three echoes come back; in other places they repeat themselves, passing back and forth across the river between the rock and the eastern wall. To hear these repeated echoes well, we must shout. Some of the party aver that ten or twelve repetitions can be heard. To me, they seem rapidly to diminish and merge by multiplicity, like telegraph poles on an outstretched plain. I have observed the same phenomenon once before in the cliffs near Long’s Peak, and am pleased to meet with it again.

Echoes within a huge landscape: geographical observations by the famous explorer of the American West JW Powell. 1895.

ANTHOLOGIA ACOUSTICA


citrus spp. Olives have been cultivated for many years in a way similar to that still seen today. Management of the olive forest is variable. Where fields are semi-abandoned a rich understory of Mediterranean shrubs and herbs has grown including the rock rose, cistus spp. and wild pistachio. The style of the stone terraces provides an indication as to whether they were built to create arable fields, or were primarily established to allow for the planting of olives. There are reputedly over 11 million olive trees on the island. Sweet chestnut trees are found on the upper slopes, and the native Mediterranean pine areas have traditional multipurpose use for both timber and non-timber forest products, although such use is now largely restricted. Near villages the vegetation includes numerous fruit trees; fig, apricots, almonds, plums, walnuts and pistachios, from which the ubiquitous mustard is derived and a kind of sweet white goo made, much loved by small children in Greece. Pistachio leaves are rich in tannins and the leaf galls caused by an aphid parasite are used in leather tanning. Larger individual trees seen in the landscape such as the Cypress are often regarded as sacred indicating a church or path. The whole island was declared a UNESCO Geopark in 2011. The geological richness was wonderfully brought to life on the field trip by Professor Irwin Novak, who spends several months a year on the island and the rest of his time at the Department of Geosciences at the University of Southern Maine. He has used satellite imagery in his research to interpret the geology of the Greek islands of Lesvos and Chios. Livestock are ever present within the cultural life of Lesvos; both sheep and goats have an enormous impact on the landscape and their meat and milk are the raw materials for landscape-noises of the earth sharing their particularities with the wind and the food, the sunlight and the sea (Thomas, 1969 p.371). I have to admit that a few days spent wandering my bones in this landscape, with good company and the prospect of stimulating discussion was impossible to resist and I certainly hope that students will be given another such chance in years to come.

ME Newcastle University.

Notes


Anthology Acoutistica Echoes within a huge landscape: geographical observations by the famous explorer of the American West JW Powell, 1895.

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Tranquility who wants it? Margaret Drabble’s sound of the Great North Road 2009

Another letter from Ros Codling My earliest thoughts about soundscapes date from late August 1989 when I received a letter from an architect/planner friend:

“Autumn is here ... and once again I am aware of the autumn sounds in the countryside - tractors ploughing and perhaps grain driers drying! Nostalgia - back to school - back to college - prospect of winter – melancholy.”

It occurs to me that not only are the sounds different because of the agricultural seasons but the echo-reverberation time of the landscape will differ greatly with the season as crop cover reverts to ploughed ground etc. This is a further subtlety on top of the natural differences between valley/flatland acoustics and woodland/beach acoustics. Is it naturally melodic? If the ploughed ground is more sound reflective than the stubble, we probably hear more of it immediately after ploughing? The town dweller missed these seasonal fluctuations. And then what about the weather - cloud cover versus clear sky etc?”

Many questions, no immediate answers, but here I am another person who recognises the importance of sound in the landscape. Reading Owen Mannings’ response to bells is interesting for I do not often hear them from the church’s surroundings as I am a ringer and therefore active on the end of a rope, rather than being able to listen outside.

PS BBC Radio 4 today (July 20th) ran an article on noises of summer with all windows open.

Where ever you moved, through pink or green courtyards, through carefully contrived darkness, you heard beneath the music and the firing, the sizzling of the great concealed lights and saw the moths flock past to shrivel against the burning concave glasses. From pages 30-31 England Made Me by Graham Green. Published by Penguin Books in association with William Heinemann Ltd 1935. A sound scene at the Tivoli Gardens, Stockholm.

‘Tranquility’ who wants it? Margaret Drabble’s sound of the Great North Road 2009


It seems important to us to be there, in that very place on this major route. Lorries, cars and coaches swished by rhythmically, endlessly. All night long
they journeyed and I would lie in bed listening to the swish and boom, the swish and boom, as they came and went, as they came and went. I loved that as a child in bed trying to sleep, but the road was awake and alive with travellers and therefore you were not alone and life had not come to a grim halt.


Letter to the Editor
Dear Bud
Latest copy of LRE received - as always, very enjoyable. With reference to your note about hedges: I attach a scan of plate 8 from Utilisation of hazel coppice, Forestry Commission Bulletin no 27, HMSO, 1956, price 10/-.

The booklet was even printed on paper made with equal amounts of hazel and softwood pulp. No such illustration was included in the later FC coppicing publications that I have. I wish we had the patience to utilise material as shown.

Yours Ros (Codling)

THE PONTFADOG OAK
By John W. Gittins of Wrecsam.
The Pontfadog oak was the oldest of the old, revered, loved…and now mourned.’ Quoted by John Vidal.

Early on the morning of the 18th April 2013, Huw Williams wasn’t too worried when he was woken up at about 2.20am by a mighty crash. The old oak had stood behind his farmhouse ‘Cilcochwyn’ above the village of Pontfadog, near Wrexham for over 1200 years. To Huw, it was nothing more than that another branch had been blown off the tree by the powerful gale. However, when he went out of the farm house in the morning he found the old oak had been blown down. The tree – a sessile oak (Quercus petraea) - which has overlooked the Ceirig valley for more than 500 years, had survived high winds, battles, fire and the threat of run-off in times of heavy rain for more than forty generations, as well as being regularly cut in the past for wood to fuel the farmhouse fires and for use in buildings on the farm.

However, this was no ordinary tree. It is deemed to be the oldest tree in Wales and the third largest oak in Britain and one of the oldest in Europe. It has a girth of 42ft 6in (12.9m). In 1881 it had a reputed girth (even greater) of over 53ft. Since 1802 AD the tree has been valued by local people, celebrated on the badge of the local school and visited by walkers. For us in Wales, the Pontfadog oak is our national tree and its place is at Cilcochwyn in the community/parish of Pontfadog in the Ceirig Valley. The tree is some six miles from the Pontcysyllte Aquaduct & Canal which as an interesting parallel has been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Its hollow bole is said to be large enough inside to seat six people around a table; in the 19th Century a bull hid inside for two days and it was very popular with Victorians who posed for photographs beside it. It is reputed that two gold chisels were hidden there in the past!

The tree with its significant history is said to have been a rallying point for Welsh Princes, including Owain Gwynedd who it is said to have met his troops under the oak in the 12th Century before defeating King Henry II of England in the Battle of Crogan in 1157.

Crogan is about two miles to the east of Cilcochwyn the home of the oak. Legend states that the tree was spared when King Henry II had his men cut down the Ceirig Woods in 1165. For many years the tree was regularly pollarded, with its branches and leaves being cut to feed livestock and to build fencing on the farm.

When it fell, the oak, with its massive hollow bole crushed a metal gate and the tips of the branches which were about to burst into leaf, were resting lightly on Cilcochwyn’s slate roof. One cannot but smile at the comment of Huw Williams, who is reputed have said, ‘it’s a pity it did not do more damage to the roof, which could have resulted in us having a new roof.’

Huw’s wife said that in the evening thirty local residents from the valley gathered around the tree, to hold what they said was a ‘pity it did not do more damage to the roof, which could have resulted in us having a new roof.’

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Notes:
Notes: The quotations come from John Vidal writing in The Observer on 28th April 2013. Coed Cadw/The Woodland Trust also issued a press release about the tree on 18th April 2013. The Pontfadog Oak is on private land and visitors should ask at Cilcochwyn farmhouse for permission to see the tree.

Two research groups collaborate at Exeter University’s Tremough campus, Falmouth
By Graham Fairclough and Pete Herrera

The Landscape Research Group (LRG) frequently sponsors conferences and workshops, and many have been described in the pages of past Extras. Recently, wearing our LRG Directors’ hats, we two organised one in Cornwall, at the University of Exeter’s Cornwall Campus, at Tremough, Penryn on the outskirts of Falmouth. We were able to do so thanks to the recently established inter-disciplinary Centre for Environmental Arts and Humanities (CEAH) which is a part of the University of Exeter’s Environment and Sustainability Institute, and which generously provided facilities and hospitality free of charge, as part of their programme of outreach and research. For this we have to thank particularly our friend and colleague Dr Nicola Whyte, for her enthusiastic support both in logistics and in helping us to devise, and indeed contributing herself to, the event’s scientific programme. CEAH aims, inter alia, to offer ‘support for collaborations within and beyond the arts and humanities,’ a good mirror to LRG’s own goals, and the Centre’s objective to ‘create opportunities for shared investigation of the complex relationships between the environment and the human imagination’ is surely a good enough summation of some of the things landscape is about.

Our conference was itself collaboration, being organised jointly with a ‘new’ partner, the Medieval Settlement Research Group. We say ‘new’ with diffidence, because, first, Peter Herrig was (until 2010) and Graham Fairclough is (since 2011) on the MSRG’s committee, as we are on LRG’s; second, whilst MSRG took its present form only in 1986, it was originally founded as long ago as 1952 as the Medieval Village Research Group, best known perhaps for its 50 year long research programme in the Yorkshire Wolds landscape around Wharram Percy. Like LRG, MSRG espouses to interdisciplinarity, like LRG it organises conferences and workshops and publishes a journal, Medieval Settle-
Perhaps we can argue that using mental, cognitive, experiential constructs to find a collective and shared way through the world in space and in time is an essential aspect of being human. So the conference was designed to explore in the context of Cornwall (and Devon, and also further afield) landscape history, and early modern people created ‘landscape’ through their perceptions of the world, and how we might be able to excavate, uncover or recover past perceptions, and thus see ‘our’ predecessors’ landscapes as well as ‘preceding landscapes’. We hoped to open windows on the further study of landscapes’ past, not merely in terms of landscape history but in terms of the layers of perception and appreciation through the generations.

The wild in Cornwall: a bit of an outlandish landscape history - Sam Turner (Newcastle University):

From Myth to Maps - the Cornish coast and changing ideas of place at the time of the Reformation - Philip Marsden

(University of Exeter):

Reliques of an old estate varyed of earth, little round hills wherein mens bones have bene fouled: prehistory in the landscape in medieval and post-medieval Cornwall - Graeme Kirkham

A medieval landscape: our view - Barbara and John Torrance (The Branscombe Project):

We cannot here describe all these - we hope to find some way to bring them to wider publication, whilst maintaining their essential nature, nor the vigorous discussions they prompted, so we will content ourselves with mentioning three very distinct presentations in more detail.

Nicola Whyte (University of Exeter) in ‘Senses of place, senses of time: recovering non-elite perceptions of the landscape from the archives’ took us to the manorial documents, to see how landscape was held and owned by study of manorial court papers concerning land use disputes, common land agreements and the like. It is that people remember landscape and what this means for the village cultural group. A key marker in one village landscape was a large elm tree (see also John Gittins note on revered trees and Bud Young’s ‘Death of a village marker’).

Midway through the day, to introduce the afternoon session, we were offered not a medieval view of the landscape per se, but a modern archeologists engagement with landscape. Paul Everson’s method has always involved the close walking of landscape; he is a field archaeologist, an archaeological surveyor, and his form of cultural engagement with the land, is through observation and recording – and thus interpretation and perception — as much as a form of landscape engagement. Indeed, performance, as any other form of embodied and enacted landscape, for example the current fashionable practice in geography of constructing landscape through walking or activity. The relevance of Paul’s contribution to the conference was also that his examples sought to understand understanding of visible remains of past landscapes to understand how medieval people perceived through them, used them, and interacted with them, whether the different, status, reflective, approaches that were deliberately engraved into the landscapes around castles, as at Leeds Castle, Kent, for example, or using his work at Barlings, Lincolnshire, the manner in which medieval abbey through land-based actions and policies created social, economic as well as realistishal landscapes in their neighbourhoods, which often still today shape the landscape.

At the end of the day, what all the papers had in common was brought together in an effective dual presentation by Barbara Bender and John Torrance. Their account of the reconstruction of a medieval memory, and what John Gittins noted in his initial exploration of the experienced landscapes of the medieval period, and what Graeme Kirkham saw in his exploration of medieval and early modern peasants coming to terms with – using, resisting, honouring, deconstructing – historic landscape that they had inherited from their predecessors, just as we struggle to come to terms with the past landscapes we have inherited.

On the second day a field excursion to Godolphin, guided by Peter Herring and the house’s past owner, Mr John Schofield, gave everyone the opportunity to think about these questions on the ground in the context of a late medieval and modern Great House, and in particular for our theme – its landscape: the complex me-dieval settled and farmed land, of undulating grazig commonsland, of sub-medieval park and warden, of form- ing and quarrying, of (re) designed landscape. A cold (as April days are these days) but bright and stimulating day.

A medieval landscape: our view, their view - Barbara and John Torrance (The Branscombe Project):

Perhaps we can argue that using mental, cognitive, experiential constructs to find a collective and shared way through the world in space and in time is an essential aspect of being human. So the conference was designed to explore in the context of Cornwall (and Devon, and also further afield) landscape history, and early modern people created ‘landscape’ through their perceptions of the world, and how we might be able to excavate, uncover or recover past perceptions, and thus see ‘our’ predecessors’ landscapes as well as ‘preceding landscapes’. We hoped to open windows on the further study of landscapes’ past, not merely in terms of landscape history but in terms of the layers of perception and appreciation through the generations.

The concept of landscape has a prehis- toric as well as modern history - to study past landscapes as objects, invest- ing them with materiality and recognising their ‘time depth’, but forgetting the layers of symbolism, representation, embodied action and perception which are embedded in them, forgetting that they were once someone’s landscape in the ELC sense of an area as perceived by people, forgetting that medieval peasants for example lived in their own historic landscape.

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BANGED UP IN THE BANLIEUS

Landscapes of suburban Paris
Gareth Roberts – March 2013

Landscapes reveal a lot about the places we visit and the people that live there. But to get the most from such visits we need to be prepared to spend time to study them carefully for it is only then can we really get to know them and discover clues that help us better understand why they are as they are. Such effort can be very rewarding, thought provoking and memorable especially when subtle secrets about the character of places become clearer to us. Such revelations are not only those commonly associated with archeological discovery and past cultures but those which tell us more about contemporary society.

This Easter along with tens of thousands of others I visited Paris. I was not one of those looking to enjoy a springtime sojourn on the banks of the Seine but to learn more about the banlieus, the predominantly high-rise cluster of settlements that have sprung up on the city’s suburbs, beyond the périphérique and the Île de la Cité where visitors throng and affluent Parisians live.

I had planned to visit Sevran Beaudottes, one of France’s most deprived communities. I was prompted to go there after being shocked to read an article in The Economist (23rd February 2013) which said that of 40 unemployed youngsters from Sevran invited by the director of the local job centre to a career fair set up by the mayor of the town to find work only 5 were employed. The poster paradoxically contained an image of a chicha, the hubble-bubble pipe smoked at cafes throughout the Middle East and Maghreb together with an Ace of Spades.

The Arc de Triomphe and the star bust of surrounding boulevards that make up the central focus of Haussmann’s grand design for Paris, one of the world’s most notable planned urban landscapes are barely 20 miles from Sevran. The Louvre, and other museums of central Paris holding some of our civilization’s most prized cultural heritage all lie within a 30 minute train journey of one of France’s most deprived communities.

Unwittingly I must have travelled through Sevran many times on my way from Charles de Gaulle airport to central Paris. The TGV and the frequent RER trains linking the airport and the city centre streak though at breakneck speed. Locals have to wait for the inconsistent and slow metro services. When I travelled back out from the centre on a crowded commuter train there were few passengers left by the time it reached the dimly lit Sevran Beaudottes metro station.

I emerged via the ticket barriers into Place Mandela, and the recently completed high-rise mall called ‘Beau Sevrar’ where a variety of halal meat outlets, takeaways and conscious food outlets were crammed in check by jowl. The mall is almost exclusively taken over by food businesses set up to cater for the large number of ethnic minorities who live in Sevran. It also proves shelter for the many who now sleep rough in Paris. The mall was completed in 2010 but the hoarding advertising the start of the work and how much EU funding support it had received, still remained. Passed onto it were posters advertising 2012 New Year alcohol free celebrations and other Maghrebian soirees catering primarily for the Muslim community. Those looking for more hedonistic and risqué entertainment could opt for a place called ‘Dallas’ where (last New Year’s Eve) men for a cover charge of 40 euros and women for 30 could partake of a buffet, a giant barbeque and a champagne breakfast. Described as ‘soiree extra-ordinaire a la chicha’, the poster paradoxically contained an image of a chicha, the hubble-bubble pipe smoked at cafes throughout the Middle East and Maghreb together with a wine bottle overprinted with an Ace of Spades.

The physical and social isolation of Sevran Beaudottes is palpable. Over 70 different nationalities and many religions are to be found here, in this one of France’s poorest areas. Unemployment, especially among the young is four times the national average. People resort to advertising their availability for work on lamp posts, offer scavenger bins for food, drug taking is rife and despite the replacement of high rise tower blocks with low rise housing and projects such as the Mandela Mall, as one comes away you cannot help but see that the banlieus are clearly a world apart and places that tourists rarely see. Out of sight and out of mind.

Last year Stéphane Gatignon, Sevran’s Green Mayor pitched his tent outside the French Parliament building to draw public attention to the plight of the banlieus and the need for more investment in environmental improvements. He was successful in securing more money for the cause of his town and I am impressed by what is already being achieved.

A campaign to raise environmental awareness among the young is being supported by schools and focuses on litter prevention and civic pride. Large illuminated posters on roadside advertisements call for people to keep their town clean. ‘J’aime ma ville. Je la garde propre’

I am glad that I visited Sevrar this Easter. The experience was richly rewarding. It helped to reinforce my belief that the European Landscape Convention’s challenge to signatory states to ‘raise the quality’ of all landscapes has to be the principal objective. All citizens deserve to live and work in attractive environments.

My ‘Rough Guide’ to Paris is silent about the banlieus. I shall be writing to the Editor to propose the next edition actually says something.

BANGED UP IN THE BANLIEUS

LANDSCAPE OF PRIMARY COLOURS

Blocks of colour in the field landscape astonish me for a brilliant moment. I was crossing Salisbury Plain in the south of England. I was travelling too fast to stop and capture it or stand and stare, explain or grow giddy (its beauty). Fields of gold patchworked with white and perhaps a pale green block, and turning intensely deep green of a woodland, roots deep in the earth at the edge of a shallow valley. A startlingly sharp landscape where fields show as vivid thumbnails of colour, woodlands take the nature of raised relief. Nothing to do with Constable or boredom or soft, celebrated pastoral greenness. Not polite but quite the opposite: startling! arresting! dramatic! exciting! In your face! Bold art in nature.

I quote from an advertised source: “For solar parks to be competitive and therefore for us to be ready to rent, we need sites that conform to the following”:

6 acres per megawatt, so preferably >12 acres

Not in AONB/SSSI or other special landscape areas. Not crossed by footpaths or bridle ways. Not grade 1 land. Flat or gently sloping land. Not shaded by woods or buildings. Power lines (>11kV or 33kV) running overhead or nearby. [Increasing distance increases costs and reduces rent]. Not unduly overlooked. Free draining, non-rocky soil. Available for 20 years minimum.

Are they any more intrusive than covered crops or polystyrene? Are they innocuous in the landscape? Highly acceptable perhaps? Do they offer a feel good benefit to the Planet Aware: ‘energy self sufficiency = good’. Do they trump windfarms in popular opinion? Are they yet another nail in the overburdened pylonic landscape which has always attracted unsightly uses and secondary ugliness?

BY
A MIND FOR PLACE-MAKING

By Brian Goodey

It was hardly a willing admission that I had gradually become disabled. A non-driver who thrives on public transport, urban and rural walking, I had gradually become limited in movement over the past two (the family would say longer) years. Urban detours between meetings became cab rides, rural exploration car stops, and the spontaneity of exploring, learned long before formal education, ground to a halt. The long-term implications were frightening - I couldn’t just train or bus to a discovered Pevsner nugget, exhibitions became a series of hops between seating, and the panoramas of new places enticingly proposed in travel catalogues were rationalised out of order. As a landscape historian, urban designer, painter and explorer I was grounded.

I write as the second knee is slowly accepting replacement, only now do I realise how much of me was tied up in the ability to walk and experience. There are brighter prospects, but during one of the non-sleeping experiences which are inevitable in post-rehab I tuned in, once more, to the random scatter of discussion on Five Live (BBC) Half awake, I heard a New York voice explaining her new collection of maps of Manhattan. A cartographer who had developed a project in which New Yorkers filled in a blank map of the city with their own geographies – no holds barred.

In semi-daze I gathered my images of the first visit to Manhattan in 1963. Landing from a ‘Queen Mary’ which had endured a very rough passage, I survived the customs whirl, explaining that the geography books in my luggage were not directed at the overthrow of the American Empire, and dived for a flop-house hotel previously booked. Then, a long-held dream come true. In one night Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers and the Gerry Mulli- gan Big Band at Birdland AND Red Allen and Gene Krupa small groups at the Metropole. Pause for images, sounds and fulfillment. The next morn- ing off to Indiana by rail – ‘BG’ never to be heard of again. Subsequent visits to NYC are all marked by music; I’ve never been up the Empire State, but I have been to Richie Havens, Max Kaminsky, Illinois Jacquet. Most recently a mixed Country and Blues concert with Ralph Stanley closing. My American maps, probably all my maps, are mainly music.

Now to Becky Cooper’s ‘Mapping Manhattan: A Love Story in Maps’ for it was she on late night Five Live. ……’Lincoln Centre Best Concert Ever’ inscribes one of the contributors to Becky Cooper’s map. A connection. The elegantly bound book is a collection of 75 mappings, over a frame provided by the author of Manhattan. It is a joyous outpouring of places which mean something to individuals; different experiences, different styles, few contained or restricted by the structures but rather a geography of emotions (‘feel-reward’ shades one contributor) and experience. Far from the required ‘place-making’ of urban design practice, this is place capturing.

These are, I suppose, the ‘mental maps’ so well known to design and planning students today – but with a profound difference. We are back to drawing of such ‘mental maps’ back to Kevin Lynch in the early 1960’s ‘Lan- dscapes of the City’ which provided however shaky the initial premise - a simple analysis of the popular view of urban places as consisting of nodes, landmarks, districts, edges and routes. In my own experience of provoking the production of such maps as evidence of the popular view of urban form. I have realised that the urban design setting and language of the usual taught exercise have always served to exclude expression of emotions and responses to sensory awareness, even in such informal maps. The student’s responses are to be ex- pressed in terms of morphology and built form.

 Totally incorrect to suggest that others have not realised that such mental or cognitive sketches of place do not include responses outside of the built form (look at the work of Lynch’s followers in the USA); but profession- al architecture and planning demands that the ‘mental map’ response is in phys- ical and morphological terms, thus reinforcing the significance of the ar-

Notes
Becky Cooper Mapping Manhattan: A Love (and Sometimes Hate) Story in Maps by 75 New Yorkers, New York: Abrams Image, 2013. Cooper has also expanded her work to Cambridge, Mass. (Kevin L might well have been pleased) and to Portland, Maine. Contribute and catch up on www.mapyourmemories.com. Permission to display maps applied for.