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Ambivalent Landscapes—Wilderness in the Urban Interstices

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores the origins and development of ambivalent responses to particular contemporary urban landscapes in historical ideas about human relationships with nature and wilderness, and suggests that post-modern wilderness may be found in the urban interstices: in woodland, abandoned allotments, river corridors, derelict or brownfield sites and especially areas in which the spontaneous growth of vegetation through natural succession suggests that nature is in control. We propose that these interstitial wilderness landscapes have numerous important functions as well as being rich repositories of meaning with implications both for theorizing nature–human relationships and for urban landscape planning and design.*

KEY WORDS: Ambivalence, interstitial, urban woodland, brownfield sites, wasteland, trees

Introduction

From circa 2001 there has been a revival of interest in the regeneration of urban green space in UK government policy prompted by the crisis affecting the funding, management and maintenance of urban parks, and the growing evidence of their beneficial effects on the health and wellbeing of urban dwellers (ODPM, 2002a). Whilst the desire to make urban green 'cleaner, safer, greener' (ODPM, 2002a), and thereby more accessible to greater numbers of people, is in many respects entirely laudable, there is a danger that this process may be taken too far. The 'Wasted Space?' campaign launched by the government's open space think tank, CABE Space, in 2003, sought to extend this process of renewal to informal, incidental forms of urban green and open space, including derelict land. A press release declared that:

> 5 000 hectares of wasted space is attached to derelict buildings mostly found on docks and canal land, undeveloped council-owned sites, former gas works, quarries and mining sites. Often a real threat to children and local residents. (Improvement and Development Agency, 2003)

CABE Space's campaign implied that there was nothing of value within such spaces, and that all urban green could benefit from their 'Manifesto for Better Public Spaces' (CABE Space, 2004). Underlying their campaign was an assumption that all urban space must have clear functions and meanings, that users' perception of safety is paramount and that all risk must be managed.

Yet it is also well known that there are many valued urban landscapes that contradict this assumption. For example, urban woodland is said to be the repository of numerous wholesome meanings including 'woodland garden', 'doorstep recreational area', 'wildlife sanctuary', 'gateway to the natural world' and 'symbol of the pastoral idyll' (Coles & Bussey, 2000). At the same time, it may be regarded as a dangerous place, particularly by women, elderly people and members of ethnic groups, who may feel themselves to be vulnerable and liable to be victims of physical or sexual assault, or robbery or mischief from gangs of young people (Burgess, 1995). In general, these woodland landscapes are often perceived as lawless, disordered places disfigured by the traces these crimes and incivilities leave behind in the form of dens, camps, fires, burnt out cars, fly tipping, collections of cans and bottles and evidence of drug abuse (Ward-Thompson *et al.*, 2004). There is evidence that some people invest these environments with good and bad meanings simultaneously. In a survey of residents' attitudes towards the surrounding woodland in Birchwood, Warrington New Town, a quarter of those who identified local green and woodland spaces as their favourite places in the locality also said that they would feel unsafe if they were alone in them (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2007). It seems likely that this ambivalence is widespread, probably applying to a wide range of urban landscapes.

Ward-Thompson (2002, p. 66) has commented on people's contradictory perceptions of wooded and secluded parkland landscapes, suggesting that "it is precisely the tension between these polarities which create what is pleasurable in thinking about and using open space". As Ward-Thompson (2002) pointed out, Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) hinted at the role of uncertainty and curiosity in landscape appreciation through their inclusion of "mystery" and "complexity" in their matrix of the four factors explaining landscape preference. Herzog and colleagues have recently done a number of studies in this area, and have established that preference and a sense of danger are not polar opposites but distinct constructs, suggesting that both may coexist in our evaluation of particular settings (Herzog & Kropscott, 2004; Herzog & Kutzli, 2002); they have also shown that mystery may be significantly correlated with both preference and danger (Herzog & Kutzli, 2002), though not in forest settings, where mystery was correlated with danger but not preference (Herzog & Kropscott, 2004). Despite the latter finding it does seem that mystery may have what Herzog and Miller (1998) have described as a "paradoxical role", provoking both positive and negative reactions.

Appleton has also acknowledged the possible co-existence of pleasure and fear in his discussion of the role of 'the sublime' (1975). The idea of the sublime gave rise to particular arrangements of landscape elements in the gardens and parks of the 18th century, which placed the viewer close to a terrifying object, but enabled contemplation of that object from a position of comparative safety, such as a rustic bridge over a raging torrent. However, it was never intended that the viewers should feel themselves to be at risk: "terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close" (Burke, 1759, p. 42). This pleasurable frisson is

fundamentally different from the sense of personal insecurity currently associated with urban woodland (Burgess, 1995).

Apart from the previously mentioned studies there have been few detailed investigations of these seemingly contradictory responses to particular landscapes. A notable exception is Edensor's (2005) exposition of industrial ruins (referred to in more detail below), which examines their multiple uses and meanings, and situates these within contemporary discourses concerning spatial order and disorder and material culture. The present paper focuses on the nature and origins of the ambivalent feelings we experience in relation to urban woodland and other wilder urban landscapes such as derelict sites that have been re-colonized with vegetation as a result of natural succession. It suggests that our perception of these landscapes is informed by a complex interweaving of ideas about human relationships with nature and concepts of wilderness. By unravelling and examining some of these ideas with reference, *inter alia*, to current theoretical discourses concerning the production of urban open space, it starts to build a framework for understanding the current role and meaning, and future potential, of urban wilderness landscapes.

The ideas put forward here relate mainly to a northwest European cultural context and we recognize that they represent our own particular perspective: a small part of a broad, diverse and continually changing set of values and philosophies.

The Beginning of Wilderness

From early on in northwest European culture, distinctions have been made between the cultivated area under human control and the surrounding wilderness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) (1989) defines a wilderness as "a wild or uncultivated region or tract of land, uninhabited, or inhabited only by wild animals; 'a tract of solitude or savageness' (quoted from Johnson's dictionary)". Wilderness is therefore not only the antithesis of human habitation and cultivation, but is also the haunt of wild animals, and may be a place of savagery and danger. Furthermore, wilderness may be distinguished from desert, which "implies entire lack of vegetation" and may therefore also be "a mingled, confused, or vast assemblage or collection *of* persons or things" including "a growth of plants". Wilderness is thus a place that is inherently confusing, "in which one wanders and loses one's way" (OED, 1989).

'Wilderness', 'forest' and 'woodland' have many common characteristics. One meaning of 'forest' is said to be "a wild and uncultivated waste, a wilderness" (OED, 1989). Like 'wilderness', 'woodland' is often used metaphorically to signify confusion, difficulty, or social exclusion. To be "in a wood" is to be "in a difficulty, trouble, or perplexity; at a loss", "not to see the wood . . . for the trees" is "to lose the view of the whole in the multitude of details" and "to go to the woods" is "to lose social status, be banished from society" (OED, 1989). The figurative use of "wilderness" and its companion words emphasize their role as psychological and social (or rather asocial) territories, as well as geographical ones.

It is probably impossible to identify a time when this idea of a hazardous, confusing and frequently afforested wilderness outside of normal human experience first formed. In Britain, when farming started to replace hunter-gathering, from about 4000 BC onwards, most of the land was covered in woodland (Rackham, 2001). At this time humans would necessarily have made some kind of distinction between the land they

cleared and cultivated, and the surrounding woodland. Certainly this woodland would have contained dangers such as wolves (which did not become extinct in Britain until the Middle Ages) and, possibly, hostile kinship groups; however, it was also part of the early farmers' territory, and would have been used for pasturing animals, hunting and gathering food (Bevan, 2004). In these circumstances the woodland would have formed part of a continuum of landscape which the humans used and occupied in different ways and therefore may not have been seen as intrinsically hostile (Oelschlaeger, 1991). A more important differentiation may have been between the territory in which a particular kinship group operated, and the surrounding territories of other groups (Bevan, 2004). Van Gennep (1960) suggests that such territories would have been separated by "neutral zones", which were "ordinarily deserts, marshes and most frequently virgin forests where everyone" had "full rights to travel and hunt." Far from being hostile, the zone was

> sacred for the inhabitants of the adjacent territories. Whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds. (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 18)

This physical or notional 'transition' forms an essential part of all rites of passage, also referred to as 'liminal rites':

> this symbolic and spatial area of transition may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico-religious position to another. (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 18)

Plumwood (1993) suggests that the idea of a hazardous wilderness outside of and contrasted with human civilization has its origins in Platonic philosophy (circa 400 BC), with its hierarchical distinctions between "dominating reason" and "inferior nature". Tillyard (1943) confirms that the medieval concept of the chain of being originated in Plato's 'Timaeus', and describes a hierarchical system with God at the top, animals plants and metals at the bottom, and humans somewhere in between, bridging the gap between the celestial and the terrestrial. Thomas (1984, p. 23) notes that early theological interpretations of Christian doctrine (a central idea being that man's purpose was to assist God in finishing his creation) and "the coming of private property and a money economy" have each been blamed for exploitation of the natural world with its associated ideas about the wilderness and "*terra nullius*".

Whatever the precise origins of wilderness it is clear that it existed as a concept with all its attendant meanings from the beginning of the medieval period, and possibly for some centuries previously. In his *History of Plymouth Colony* (1948, p. 86) (also quoted by Thomas, 1984, p. 194), written 1630–1650, Bradford described the English and Dutch pilgrims' arrival at Cape Cod in New England in 1620:

> what could they see but a desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men . . . and the whole country full of woods and thickets, presented a wild and savage view.

Such views seem to have been widespread in Western Europe from the early medieval period onwards.

The idea of wilderness as outside of and opposed to civilization was informed by an anthropocentric world view which sorted the world and everything in it into things humans could derive benefit from, which were therefore good, and things that were useless, which were consequently imbued with moral badness. Thus wilderness, including woodland, was not just outside of civilization, it was an affront to it, and it was a human duty to eradicate it, if the land could be put to better use, which was usually to fields, but the metal industries and especially iron smelting had also taken a heavy toll on forests in England by the 13th century (Merchant, 1989). Thomas (1984, p. 196) writes:

> In 1712 John Morton observed with complacency that there were very few woods in Northamptonshire: 'In a country full of civilized inhabitants,' timber could not be 'suffered to grow. It must give way to fields and pastures, which are of more immediate use and concern to life'. (Morton, 1712, pp. 12–13)

As noted earlier, a characteristic of wilderness was that its edges very often marked the limit of a human or social territory, either geographically or in terms of the ability to control or police the land. Consequently wilderness and woodland came to be seen as a haven for criminals and outlaws; as well as the socially excluded (Thomas, 1984). The moral degeneracy of the woods was extended to the people who made use of them as hiding places and lived in them. Tuan (1980, p. 81) notes that Bartholomaeus Anglicus wrote in the 13th century:

> Woods be wild places, waste and desolate...There is place of hiding and of lurking, for oft in wood thieves are hid, and oft in their awaits and deceits passing men come, and are spoiled and robbed and oft slain.

Alongside the view of wilderness as a place of inhuman savagery, was a much more benign personification of the natural world in the form of a usually female deity, or Mother Nature. This was associated with the fruitfulness of nature, and human dependence on it for most necessities. According to this view of the world, nature and culture were linked rather than separated by cultivation; and up until the early 16th century the word 'culture' meant "the tending *of* something, basically crops or animals" (Williams, 1976, p. 77). According to Merchant (1989), this view of nature as benign and nurturant was prevalent until the 16th century, when it began to be undermined by the rationalist, scientific revolutions and the development of capitalism.

From the early 16th century onwards the meaning of the word 'culture' began to split away from the cultivation of the natural world, being used first in relation to the cultivation of the human intellect, before acquiring, in the late 18th century, its modern, abstract sense of collective human intellectual achievement or understanding (Williams, 1976).

The End of Wilderness?

The 18th century saw a profound transformation in attitudes towards wilderness, which was probably attributable partly to its increasing scarcity, as more and more land was brought into cultivation (Thomas, 1984). Whereas Daniel Defoe (1727), writing in the early decades of the 18th century, seemed to adopt the pre-modern

view of wilderness in his tirades against a number of British wilderness landscapes, by the end of the century such landscapes were being celebrated by the Romantics, in their animistic and transcendent portrayals of wild nature.

It is not surprising that this change in attitudes coincided with the development of the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime. Many wrote on these ideas, including Burke and Kant. The development of theories of the sublime seem, with hindsight, to be an attempt to engage with the vastness, infinity and ineffability of nature (and wilderness). Whereas, according to Burke (1759) in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, the apprehension of beauty is a spontaneous reaction to unchallenging objects or entities that inspire love or pleasure, the sublime is the unreasoned delight provoked by the exposure to terror, provided one is not personally threatened: "a sort of delightful horror" (Burke, 1759, p. 123). Thus for example:

> We have continually about us animals of a strength that is considerable, but not pernicious. Amongst these we never look for the sublime: it comes upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness, in the form of the lion, the tiger, the panther, or rhinoceros. (Burke, 1759, p. 60)

Whilst sublimity is generally reserved for the enormous and the powerful, it may also reside in the little, as in this beautiful extract, concerning the sublimity of matter itself:

> However, it may not be amiss to add to these remarks upon magnitude; that, as the great extreme of dimension is sublime, so the last extreme of littleness is in some measure sublime likewise; when we attend to the infinite divisibility of matter, when we pursue animal life into these excessively small, and yet organized beings, that escape the nicest inquisition of the sense, when we push our discoveries yet downward, and consider those creatures so many degrees yet smaller, and the still diminishing scale of existence, in tracing which the imagination is lost as well as the sense, we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness; nor can we distinguish in its effect this extreme of littleness from the vast itself. (Burke, 1759, p. 66)

According to Kant, who set out his versions of the sublime in the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), and the later *Critique of Judgment* (1790), an appreciation of the 'beautiful' is the result of a connection between imagination and understanding, whereas a comprehension of the 'sublime' is a product of the imagination and reason. Awareness of the 'beautiful' is subjective, intuitive and sensual, whilst the sublime is marked by "conflict, disharmony, struggle and violence", produced by the inability of the imagination to comprehend the magnitude of external objects; as a result of which the mind rejects sensibility and the imagination and concentrates instead on "higher finality" (Kant, 1790, pp. 91–92 (Meredith translation)) quoted in Klinger (1997), who sums this up as follows:

> The feeling of the sublime that is aroused by some phenomena of external nature . . . is nothing but a reflection of man's own sublimity that consists in his independence from nature as a rational, as a moral being. (Klinger, 1997, p. 198)

Examples of natural phenomena inspiring this reaction are: "massive mountains climbing skyward, deep gorges with raging streams in them, wastelands lying in deep shadow" (Pluhar's translation of the *Critique of Judgment*, 1987, p. 129, quoted by Klinger, 1997).

Burke and Kant's versions of the sublime differ in the sense that for Burke, the "delightful horror" was incompatible with reason, whereas in Kant's interpretation the horror was sublimated in an assertion of the superiority of human rationality and morality. Both were an attempt to come to terms with the otherness of nature, and both were, in a sense, unsuccessful. In Burke's exposition the ultimate in sublimity is death itself (see for example, p. 55 and p. 159), yet he fails to address the central flaw in his reasoning, which is that no-one can be a bystander to their own death. Likewise, Kant remained mortal, for all his "higher finality". However, such attempts to accommodate nature and wilderness within a philosophical and aesthetic framework created a highly influential and durable paradigm. Nurturant, cultivated nature became the ideal of beauty, associated with the picturesque, whereas the remnants of the former wilderness landscapes became archetypes of the sublime.

The idea of walking for reflection and recreation in what had been the wilderness, as practised by the Romantics, and the associated notions of scenic landscape beauty and scenic tourism (which had their origin in the sublime), later became part of the philosophical basis for the foundation of the National Park movement (Solnit, 2001). So, in the space of about 100 years, the wilderness landscapes were transformed from public enemy to national treasure.

The Return of Wilderness?

Whilst the idea of wilderness as antithetical to human civilization appears to have ended with the advent of the sublime, wild nature was not to be defeated so easily. Another word which has been used frequently in a wilderness context is 'waste', 'waste land' and latterly, 'wasteland'. In some respects 'waste', 'waste land' and 'wilderness' are synonymous (OED, 1989). Both were regarded as '*terra nullius*' with no intrinsic value, characteristics or even content of their own, and therefore available for exploitation and colonization (Plumwood, 1993). However, there are some important differences. "Waste land" often denotes a place that is more barren and less vegetated than 'wilderness'; it may also signify "a devastated region" and may include "former places of habitation or cultivation, buildings etc."; "to lie waste" means "to remain in an uncultivated or ruinous condition" (OED, 1989). There is therefore a sense in which land may be claimed from the wilderness, cultivated, and then abandoned or despoiled, so that it then returns to waste and wilderness:

> But since they departed hence, the land lay useless, uninhabited and became waste, and it was completely covered in vegetation and so became wilderness. (Trinity College Homilies, 1200, quoted in OED, 1989)

In this example, 'waste' is clearly an intermediate stage between cultivation and 'wilderness', which is associated with the overgrowth of vegetation.

If the continued existence of primordial wilderness was morally reprehensible, abandoning land that had been settled was seen as even more dishonourable. Writing about plantations (or the new colonies) Sir Francis Bacon declared:

> It is the sinfullest thing in the world to forsake or destitute a plantation once in forwardness; for, besides the dishonour, is the guiltiness of blood of many commiserable persons. (Bacon, 1597, p. 356, cited in Miller, 2001, p. 216)

In the so-called 'New World', establishing a colony was a risky business, which might well involve the death or disappearance of the colonists. This was apparently the fate of England's first North American colonists, who disappeared in 1587 after they were deposited on the island of Roanoke, off the coast of North Carolina (Miller, 2001).

Wherever the wilderness was cleared for human settlement, it seems likely that such places would only have been abandoned if some catastrophe had overtaken the inhabitants, given the effort and possible risks involved in clearing land in the first place. From an early period therefore, such abandonment, and the consequential ruination of built structures, and invasion of vegetation, must have been associated not only with wasted endeavour but also with misfortune, mortality and destruction. In 'The Ruin', an unascribed Anglo-Saxon poem about Roman remains, the narrator muses over the fate of the former inhabitants:

> Came days of pestilence, on all sides men fell dead,
> Death fetched off the flower of the people;
> Where they stood to fight, waste places
> And on the acropolis, ruins. (Alexander, 1966, p. 30)

Paradoxically however, the abandonment of settlements, and their reversion to waste, wilderness and *terra nullius* also created opportunities for others to reoccupy these sites, as for example in the aftermath of the plague epidemics, resulting in the wholesale abandonment of rural settlements (Barnatt & Smith, 2004, p. 76).

'The Ruin', dating from the 5th or 6th century AD, is referred to by Janowitz (1990, p. 7) as "England's first ruin poem". Janowitz (1990) and others (including Roth, 1997a, 1997b; Woodward, 2002) have described how ruins, usually of buildings of political or religious significance, have been used in western literature and visual art to venerate past civilizations and maintain links with the past, whilst also standing as symbols for death and decay, and the futility of human endeavour. Ruins are inherently ambivalent, being "emblematic of transience and of persistence over time" (Roth, 1997a). Within this iconography of ruins, which reached its fullest expression in the 18th century, nature also played an ambiguous role. On one hand the overgrowth of vegetation in ruins adds to their picturesque beauty, on the other it is the action of natural forces that slowly destroys them, with its implicit threat of what Janowitz (1990, p. 108) calls: "a frightening reversion to matter".

However, other more recent artistic representations of ruins and abandoned landscapes were to challenge this comfortable accommodation between nature and culture. Janowitz (1990) has described how, in his early poetry, Wordsworth used images of ruins set in wilderness (Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain) and an

uncultivated cottage garden to explore anti-establishment political ideas. In his photographic essay on ruins Roth (1997c) juxtaposes a photograph of the ruined Hotel de Ville in Paris, destroyed by the communards in 1871, with Gustave Flaubert's anti-bourgeois sentiments:

> Yesterday I saw some ruins, beloved ruins of my youth which I knew already...I thought again about them, and about the dead whom I had never known and on whom my feet trampled. I love above all the sight of vegetation resting upon old ruins; this embrace of nature, coming swiftly to bury the work of man the moment his hand is no longer there to defend it, fills me with deep and ample joy. (Flaubert, 1847, p. 271, quoted in Roth, 1997c)

Woodward (2002) describes Richard Jefferies's (1885, no date) apocalyptic (and strangely prescient) fictional works of the late 19th century, in which London is destroyed variously by natural forces, namely snow and flooding, leaving only a few survivors amongst the ruins.

Latterly the cultural context for ruins and abandoned landscapes has changed yet again. After the Second World War particularly, humanity is seen to have replaced nature as the agent of destruction:

> In the wake of World War II, culture itself came to be cast as a ruin, a troubled witness to the violence of humanity rather than as a spectator of the sublime powers of nature...The regular rhythms of nature have been replaced in our time by the enormity of our capacity for ruination. (Roth, 1997b, p. 20)

This "capacity for ruination" is no longer the work of an indiscriminate fate but an ineluctable part of the post-modern world order. The cycle of building and dereliction seems to have accelerated to the point where there is no distinction between the process of building and the process of ruination. The artist, Robert Smithson, uses a metaphor reminiscent of film clips, in which the demolition of industrial structures is shown 'backwards', to comment on the industrial ruins of Passaic, New Jersey:

> That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is, all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the romantic ruin because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built. (Smithson, 1967, p. 72, quoted in Merewether, 1997, p. 31)

Post-modern Wilderness

Abandoned and ruined urban spaces, such as the ones depicted by Robert Smithson (1967), are the wastelands of the 20th and early 21st century, CABE Space's 'Wasted Space'. The compound 'wasteland' has been in use since 1887 and denotes both "land in its natural, uncultivated state" and "land (esp. that which is surrounded by developed land) not used or unfit for cultivation or building and allowed to run

wild'' (OED, 1989). The second sense of unused or unusable land between developed areas, in a state of transition from usefulness to wilderness, is said to date from 1922 and is closer to modern usage (OED, 1989). Just as the pre-modern *terra nullius* was regarded as a void awaiting colonization and exploitation, so contemporary wasteland is frequently regarded as a non-entity, fit for nothing but improvement or development; and as with the old *terra nullius*, it is often shown as literally blank space on maps and plans (Doron, 2007); its status as *tabula rasa* sometimes symbolically reinforced by the anticipatory demolition of structures, levelling of the ground and removal of vegetation, so that it becomes "set aside from the processes of landscape" (Qviström & Saltzman, 2006, p. 34).

Yet despite this negation of wasteland in planning terms, it has been accorded an important role in contemporary spatial theory. Current discourses concerning urban space and place making have tended to distinguish between spaces that are highly ordered, controlled and homogenous and spaces that are disordered, chaotic and disjointed; but have theorized these differences in a variety of ways. Hetherington (1997, pp. 22–23) has described the development of this area of social theory and suggests Lefebvre (1991) as an appropriate starting point. Lefebvre's Marxist perspective sees the creation of space as a capitalist enterprise to facilitate its own ends, the process of which is normalized by its own "ideological representations" (Hetherington, 1997, p. 22); but which may be challenged from what Lefebvre (1991, p. 33) refers to as "representational spaces". These are not physical spaces in themselves, but locations of ideological and political resistance which are nevertheless facilitated by the existence of what Hetherington calls "ambivalent", "interstitial" (Hetherington, 1997, p. 23 and p. 20) spaces within capitalism's imperfectly formed spatial fabric.

Both Hetherington (1997) and Edensor (2005) employ Foucault's (1986) idea of 'heterotopia' to describe such spaces. According to Hetherington (1997, p. viii) "Heterotopias organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them." In his book *Industrial Ruins*, Edensor (2005, pp. 62–63) states that:

> heterotopia may also have parallels with places and spaces which are organised more loosely, in contingent fashion, perhaps marginally and over limited spells of time, where peculiar juxtapositions of objects and spaces seem disorderly, where hybrids and amalgamations are the rule, elements which rebuke the normative modern orderings and encodings of space.

Whereas some commentators have sought to locate 'representational spaces', 'heterotopias' and related spatial concepts in specific localities (Edensor's "industrial ruins"), or on physical margins or boundaries (Shields, 1991), others maintain that they may occur whenever the right combinations of physical and social circumstances coalesce (Franck & Stevens, 2007; Hetherington, 1997; Rivlin, 2007; Schneekloth, 2007; Wilson, 1991). According to Franck and Stevens (2007) "loose space" may occur when the assigned use for a landscape type ends, allowing new uses to replace the programmed ones, or when alternative users are somehow able to "appropriate" the space for their own ends, alongside official users; such space is distinguished from "the aesthetically and behaviourally controlled and homogenous

'themed' environments of leisure and consumption where nothing unpredictable must occur'' (Franck & Stevens, 2007, p. 29 and p. 3).

In another variation of this dialectic of hegemonic and "representational space" Gold and Revill (2003) use Zukin's (1991) model of power and vernacular landscapes to explore how fear shapes urban landscape through marginality, spectacle and surveillance: power landscapes, such as gated communities and commercial districts are created by economically and politically dominant groups and are said to be ordered, homogenous, purified and excluding, whereas vernacular landscapes, such as slums or squatter camps are expressive, unreflected, quotidian, subordinate and resistant. This model serves to emphasize that most urban landscapes, whether they be power landscapes or vernacular landscapes, are shaped by sustained or purposive human intention, activity and occupation. In contrast we would suggest a further category of "representational space", in which human agency does not appear to be a formative or "reflected" process. These interstitial spaces exist in the gaps between both power and vernacular landscapes (of all types found in the urban context) and include woodland, unused allotments, river corridors, derelict or brownfield sites and especially areas in which the spontaneous growth of vegetation through natural succession suggests that natural rather than human agencies are in control of shaping the land. We will argue that these spaces are a contemporary form of wilderness that is rapidly acquiring new meanings, in addition to the old, which are surprisingly persistent.

The Meanings of Post-modern 'Interstitial' Wilderness

Although often heavily polluted and disturbed by human activity, interstitial wilderness sites can be important wild life habitats and may also be high in biodiversity, as Shoard (2000) and Edensor (2005) have also described; containing, *inter alia*, native plant species, naturalized non-native garden escapes such as Michaelmas Daisy (*Aster spp.*), and, remarkably, spontaneously occurring new hybrid plant species such as the crossing of Oxford Ragwort (*Senecio squalidus*) an introduced species, with Sticky Groundsel (*Senecio viscosus*), a native species (Gilbert, 1991).

However, the presence of this abundant plant and animal life conjures many conflicting responses (see Edensor, 2005, p.42 ff, for a detailed account). Woodward (2002, p. 230) quotes from Rose Macaulay's account of the aftermath of the blitz in the City of London:

> the great pits with their dense forests of bracken and bramble, golden ragwort and coltsfoot, fennel and foxglove and vetch, all the wild rambling shrubs that spring from ruin, the vaults and the cellars and caves, the wrecked guildhalls . . . the broken office stairways that spiralled deeply past empty doorways and rubbled closets into the sky, empty shells of churches with their towers still strangely spiring above the wilderness, their empty window arches where green bows push in, their broken pavement floors . . . all this scarred and haunted green and stone and brambled wilderness lying under the August sun, a-hum with insects and astir with secret, darting, burrowing life, received the returning traveller into its dwellings with a wrecked indifferent calm. (Macaulay, 1950)

In this extract the central metaphor is the City of London as a wilderness. There is a sense both of primeval and secondary wilderness: primeval wilderness is evoked by the perceived vigour of the growth of plants and microcosmic life; secondary wilderness is inherent in the idea of the traveller's return to a devastated, but once familiar place that has reverted to wilderness (Woodward, 2002, p. 45ff). Within this scene of human devastation, nature is both powerful, and indifferent to human suffering, exploiting its opportunity. The mess of "green and stone and brambled wilderness lying under the August sun, a-hum with insects and astir with secret, darting, burrowing life" evokes a kind of primordial soup, outside of human experience and comprehension, reminiscent of Janowitz's (1990, p. 108) "frightening reversion to matter". The growth of vegetation within interstitial wilderness sites, and especially trees and other woody vegetation, frequently has these primordial qualities. If anything, such woodland most resembles the tangled confusion of the wildwood, seemingly having the power to obliterate everything and return the land to its primeval state within an alarmingly short space of time (Dettmar, 1999, p. 36). On the other hand, in a world transformed by nuclear technology and global warming the hybridizing of species and the apparent vigour with which wild nature reasserts itself in interstitial wilderness spaces, in the face of unbelievable human depredation, seems strangely comforting. As Mycio's (2005) account of the richness of animal and plant life in the wilderness exclusion zone surrounding Chernobyl suggests, the ability of nature to survive and adapt to the most destructive forces that humans can unleash, albeit in a grossly damaged form, appears to offer some hope for the future.

Aesthetic responses to interstitial wilderness sites are also confusing since this form of landscape does not correspond with familiar and valued archetypes (Shoard, 2000): regenerated woodland within such sites resembles neither the sublime cathedral-like greenwood (Schama, 1996), nor the beautiful ordered domesticity of the coppice, nuttery or orchard. Even the tree species are the wrong sort: Schama's (1996, p. 178) wry catalogue relates to 17th-century French forestry, but the metaphors used still have a contemporary resonance:

> At the top were the noble oak and beech, on whose strength and longevity the defense of the realm rested. Beneath them were the softwood conifers, the vegetable bourgeoisie, monotonous in their culture but indispensable for certain tasks. Even the artisans of the woods—ash and lime, hornbeam and chestnut— had their proper function. But just as an ill-tended forest concealed so much human canaille—brigands and smugglers and vagrants—so it sheltered the scraggly, misshapen good-for-nothing growths of willow and bog alder, and white birch.

Interstitial wilderness sites are often unmanaged, and for those who use an aesthetic of care to evaluate the quality of urban communities and their landscapes, may signify a complete breakdown in social order (Nassauer, 1995; Jorgensen *et al.*, 2007). In this way such places may become the focus for far more diffuse, non-specific fears transposed "from a general feeling of insecurity, one which is largely derived from experience of the social world" (Dickens, 1992, p. xvii).

The muddle of human and natural agency that is often present within interstitial wilderness sites creates conceptual as well as physical confusion. As Gold and Revill (2003) point out, such ambiguities are especially complex and difficult to unravel in the context of landscape because of ''landscape's ability to conceal its own artifice''. Is the vegetation a physical manifestation of human neglect and disregard, or part of a natural healing process? Is the site contaminated or cleansed by its growth? Is it somehow complicit in concealing the despoliation and pollution of the site (Nassauer, 1995)? Cloke and Jones (2004, p. 325) have described this process of assigning new meanings to natural and human agencies as 'bricolage' in the context of an overgrown cemetery at Arnos Vale in Bristol:

> Trees have made 'wild' the very place where they were deployed to contribute to order, and the dwelling place of some of them has complexly transformed from being 'in-place' to being 'out-of-place'.

The difficultly in separating the natural from the human in origin on post-industrial woodland sites is likely to be especially problematic for people with anthropocentric views. De Groot and Van den Born (2003) found that views of the appropriate human–nature relationship are associated with landscape preference: people with anthropocentric views prefer man-made and park-like landscapes, whereas those with ecocentric views prefer landscapes ''in which one may experience the greatness and forces of nature''. If natural and human influences are all mixed up it is impossible to tell whether humans are in control. Plumwood (1993, p. 162) has observed that ''hyperseparated understandings of the concept of wilderness'' based on the nature/culture dualism demand a complete separation of natural and human agency: ''Non-pristine nature may be seen as spoilt, inferior and unworthy of defence.''

Historically 'waste land' was often equated with common land. The OED (1989) states that in legal usage it means ''a piece of such land not in any man's occupation, but lying common'', ''such land'' being ''a piece of land not cultivated or used for any purpose''; and Gilbert (1991) has coined the phrase ''urban common'' to describe contemporary urban wasteland, effectively evoking its human ecology, which like its biological counterpart, opportunistically stakes a claim to available territory. Unlike most other urban public spaces, they are not prescriptive: each individual seems free to do in them as they choose. Consequently these places fulfil a multiplicity of different roles for different people. They are places to take short cuts, walk the dog, wander about, gather blackberries, hang out, light a fire, dump rubbish, sleep rough, take drugs, ride a motorbike, build a den or chop down trees, to give but a few examples. The apparent relaxation of legal and social conventions in interstitial spaces creates welcome opportunities for people to do things that they would not be able to do in any other urban setting, such as young people gathering and travellers setting up encampments. On the other hand, the commission of these acts may itself proscribe the actions of potential users who might otherwise be tempted to interact with these spaces.

Playing in nature has a positive impact on children's social play, concentration and motor ability (Bang *et al.*, 1989; Fjortoft, 1995, 1998, 1999; Grahn, 1991; Grahn *et al.*, 1997) and diversity in vegetation and topography enhances the ability of the

natural playscape to improve motor ability (Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000). Contrary to what the CABE Space 'Wasted Space?' campaign (2003) suggests, and despite the many dangers inherent in interstitial wilderness sites, all the evidence indicates that they are particularly important as children's play spaces, having the right combination of "water and or dirt, trees, bushes, and tall grass, variable topography, animal life, 'loose parts' i.e. things to build with and 'found' resources such as berries or fruits" (Hart, 1982, p. 5).

Edensor (2005, p. 95) likens the experience of exploring ruins to 'anti-tourism', in the sense that it is the opposite of conventional tourism, in which the tourist is exposed to a series of highly manipulated cultural or experiential set pieces with the minimum of effort and risk to themselves. This 'anti-tourism' is exemplified in the work of the German artist, Boris Sieverts, who conducts guided tours through the urban periphery in a kind of pilgrim's progress, visiting places labelled as 'end of the world', 'savannah', 'the Hun', 'rubbish dump', 'asylum seekers' and 'enchanted forest', arriving at last at journey's end at the 'barbecue' and 'hotel' (Figure 1).[1] Sieverts uses metaphors of wilderness, past and present, and conventional tourism to question and explore the processes by which places are constructed and consumed, adventurously 'discovering' the bizarre and outlandish within the city's own spatial and social geographies. The human outcasts and material waste that have been cleansed from the sanitized and well-functioning spaces of the city reappear within the interstitial spaces of the urban periphery, often derelict and discarded themselves. The 'end of the world' signifies the beginning of a voyage of discovery through an unknown territory. 'Savannah' is suggestive of wild animals and a hunter gatherer existence. 'The Hun' conjures up barbarian hordes. A 'rubbish dump' has connotations of waste land, the transitional phase to wilderness. The 'asylum seekers' are the socially excluded, forced to dwell in no man's land. Finally, the 'enchanted forest' evokes a liminal realm of both wonder and confusion: the embodiment of childhood fairy tales. Wonderment evaporates as the tour terminates at the sanitized destination of all tourists, 'barbecue' and 'hotel'.

Sieverts's 'enchanted forest' suggests that, in additional to the bodily journey undertaken by the participants in his guided tours, there is the possibility of a psychological transition, similar to Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage: a liminal experience associated with a spatial transition through a locale that lies outside the normal social order. Wilderness and woodland as a setting for personal transformation is a well known western cultural and literary trope; the stuff of, *inter alia*, fairy tale protagonists' trials and tribulations, the finding of self or recovery of lost identity in Shakespearean drama, and Christian sojourn in the wilderness. Interstitial wilderness landscapes present an opportunity to try out numerous other identities and ways of being, unmediated by the physical, social and cultural demands that adhere to most other urban areas. This may represent a confrontation with fear or danger, what Edensor (2005, p. 15) calls a "modern gothic" (which may also be seen as a contemporary version of the sublime):

> These pleasures are of a vicarious engagement with fear and a confrontation with the unspeakable and one's own vulnerability and mortality, a diversion which is also a way of confronting death and danger and imagining it in order to disarm it, to name and articulate it in order to deal with it.
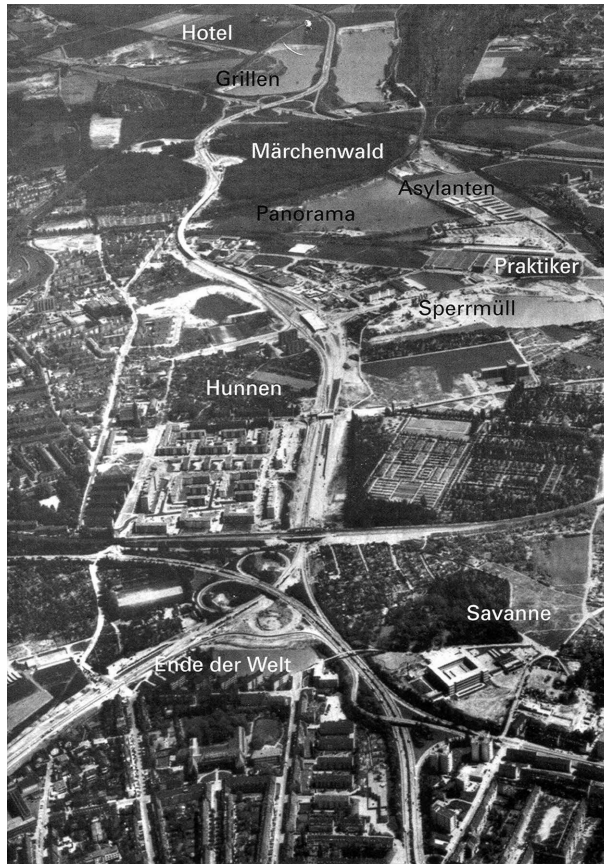
Figure 1. Postcard promoting 'Journeys through the Urban Periphery' 2003 by Boris Sieverts.

Alternatively these other ways of being relate, amongst many other possibilities, to experiences of a transcendent nature (Williams & Harvey, 2001), what Schneekloth calls "the imagination of a less bounded self" (2007, p. 264); which may lead to a re-imagining of human–nature relationships, The persistence of this paradox at the core of human–wilderness relationships is confirmed by recent research, which found "wild nature", described as "an impenetrable forest, a primeval swamp, or a rain forest", to be associated with thoughts of both death and freedom:

> The double association between wilderness and thoughts about death and freedom supports the idea that wilderness activates ambivalent meanings. (Koole & Van den Berg, 2005, p. 1017)

Conclusions

As we have tried to demonstrate, interstitial wilderness landscapes may be rich in terms of their reciprocating natural and human ecologies, both acted upon by disturbance

and change. They are evolving landscapes which re-connect our natural-cultural selves in the context of our urban existence. Their ambivalence and ambiguity should not be seen as a failing but as a reservoir of meanings, which may be constantly elaborated and explored. They have an important role both in terms of their physical functions and as a means of unlocking imaginative truths and questions about the human condition. They hold our local histories within their interlocking layers of nature–human interaction (Shoard, 2000). Their complexity presents a rich contrast to the bland, sanitized landscapes that are now the mainstay of so much urban development.

The earlier discussion of 'waste land' and the quotation from the Trinity College Homilies reveals that the process of cultivated, productive land reverting to wilderness is not a modern phenomenon. As a result of global warming and other effects of development and industrialization, there is no part of the earth that has not been affected in some way by human activities. In this broad sense all nature can be said to be a hybrid between nature and humans. Interstitial wilderness is more obviously hybridized because, neither cultivated nor wild (in the sense of a recognizable wilderness typology), it does not conform to any traditional or well-known vision of nature. As such it presents unique opportunities for new types of interaction between humans and nature. These potentialities are currently attracting much interest, having for example been theorized by Berman (1984) as "participatory consciousness", Bishop (1990) as "ecological imagination" (both cited in Schneekloth, 2007, p. 265 and p. 268), and by Hinchliffe & Whatmore (2006) as "ecological co-fabrication" and "a politics of conviviality".

A re-visioning of interstitial wilderness sites could have far-reaching implications for urban landscape planning and design. Rather than problematizing such sites as 'Wasted Space' (Cabe Space, 2003), their essential qualities could be used to inform the planning, design and management of green and open space throughout the city. Summarized in the opening paragraph of this conclusion, these attributes include their ability to accommodate the spontaneous development of wild nature, the freedom and flexibility they offer to human thought and action; but above all the ways in which human and natural agency have become enmeshed over time.

The value of green structure and multifunctional green networks within urban areas is well-known; but in the UK at least government thinking about green and open space in cities remains somewhat compartmentalized. Planning Policy Guidance Note 17: Open Space, Sport and Recreation ('PPG 17') (ODPM, 2002b) is an admirable attempt to encourage local authorities to adopt a more holistic approach to planning and managing urban green, but remains focused on its amenity and sports benefits. Interstitial wilderness sites are present in the PPG 17 typology in the form of "natural and semi-natural spaces (including wastelands and derelict open land)"; but the typology seems to emphasize differences between the various forms of green, rather than identifying commonalities. The previously mentioned interstitial wilderness attributes of natural wildness and human freedom need not be confined to one category in the PPG 17 typology but could instead form a common basis for planning and thinking about urban green. These attributes are already present in many spaces falling into most of the categories of the PPG 17 typology, such as within remnant woodlands in parks, disused allotments, and poorly maintained cemeteries and amenity greenspace. Why could they not be positively reframed as the essential and recurring qualities of the urban green

infrastructure, within which more intensively maintained forms of urban greenspace with more specific functions are placed? Other commentators have argued for a similar re-visioning of urban green and open space including Ward-Thompson's (2002, p. 70) "patchwork of changing, loose-fit landscapes" and Edensor's (2005, p. 172) "host of alternative forms of public space".

Instead of conceptualizing derelict urban sites as *terra nullius*, containing nothing of value, and clearing them in readiness for future development, their intricate topography of human structures and artifacts, natural growth and decay, could be treated as the basis for future site planning and design. Wherever possible, services and structures could be preserved and re-utilized, or used as the basis for future building footprints and layouts, or landscape elements; materials could be recycled; the varied landform and natural habitats that are frequently the aftermath of industrial dereliction could provide the framework for new landscapes; the specialized tree and shrub colonies that appear at particular stages of natural succession could be used to inform vegetation strategies; and the plant communities that occur on particular substrates could, together with the residue of buildings and machinery, be used to define a series of locales within a larger landscape.

This is not to suggest that derelict industrial sites should be given a kind of heritage treatment, rather that the essential qualities of such sites should be respected, and used as the basis for future development, rather than adopting a *tabula rasa* approach. A heritage approach—the act of preserving the site at a given point in time—would, in any case, destroy the very qualities that it sought to preserve, which are dependent on natural and human processes and their continuing interaction. This highlights another important aspect of interstitial wilderness landscapes, which is their temporal dimension. Ward-Thompson (2002, p. 70) has argued that "a much longer time-frame" may be necessary "for engaging effectively with the entirety of the ecological networks which structure our towns and cities". At the other end of the temporal spectrum, Qviström and Saltzman (2006) have suggested that urban planning is ill-equipped to deal with ephemeral or transitional landscapes, being primarily concerned with spatial issues. They use the example of 'Gyllin's Garden', a former flower nursery in the inner urban fringe of the city of Malmö, Sweden, which was abandoned in the 1970s and reverted to wilderness, to highlight the need for planning to deal with the temporal as well as the spatial aspects of the urban areas within their jurisdiction. Despite official designation for other purposes, Gyllin's Garden was eventually "reinterpreted as 'wilderness'" in the municipal plan in 2000, and is to be retained as a 'nature park', surrounded by new residential areas built on adjacent arable fields (Qviström & Saltzman, 2006, p. 29). Whatever the length of the time scales, it seems that the dynamics of interstitial wilderness sites demand that temporal aspects be considered when deciding the future of these sites, and begs the question of whether the temporal dimension is adequately considered in urban landscape planning and design generally. Doron (2007), for example, has highlighted how the formal and informal human uses of an urban space may overlap, through a temporal/spatial sharing, and how this potential richness is not always adequately addressed in new designs for urban sites. Oswalt *et al.* (2007) have also demonstrated how a planning approach based on the spontaneous appropriation and 'temporary use' of derelict urban space can be a viable approach to urban regeneration.

Re-visioning interstitial wilderness landscapes and their role in the urban fabric implies new ways of structuring towns and cities and presents some alternatives to the *tabula rasa* approach to developing brownfield sites; furthermore this discussion of their previously summarized qualities opens up some new possibilities in urban landscape planning and design more generally, and questions the relentless production, reproduction, consumption (and destruction) of over-programmed urban environments. It challenges the landscape and other professions involved in urban planning and design to take risks in advocating such approaches, and to help develop the necessary techniques and expertise to facilitate their implementation.

Acknowledgements

Note

1 For more information about the work of Boris Sieverts, see online: http://www.neueraeume.de/start.htm (accessed 12 March 2007).

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