

SITES OF EXCEPTION

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By

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*All sites are in North Carolina

ABSTRACT

SITES OF EXCEPTION

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My thesis focuses on photographing communal spaces throughout North Carolina. Uninhabited most of the time and not overtly commercial in use, these sites remain predominantly unaccounted for by domestic or market-driven considerations, yet make up a significant part of the region.

It is the relational-experiential places that I am initially curious to photograph. Often structured in counter-distinction to dominant cultural trends, these communal spaces exist, historically, as sites of exception. By photographing these sites, I hope to introduce questions that explore impulses evidenced in these structures. What is it to gather? What is it to participate in, to form and reform communities?

A site also, the photograph offers a means of alternative inquiry and – in considering its own constrained frame – the potential for dialogue into the limits by which sites are sustained. It is often by way of the slant, suggestive evidence of the photograph that intricacies of cultural signification may begin to be seen.

INTRODUCTION

The photographs in this project are taken within the state lines of North Carolina and along the lines of my experiences growing up here. My interest in these sites is informed by a curiosity regarding forms of exchange based on something other than domestic necessity or the acquisition of monetary or physical commodities, but oriented instead to indeterminate yet evidenced senses of experience within the context of communal spaces.

I am interested in these as sites of exception – publicly sanctioned places of hospitality in as varied forms as environmentally or socially open spaces: parks, community centers, eco-protected areas, churches. Or, conversely, exclusive structures established by articulated motivations toward some form of public beneficence including (in the scope of this project), Masonic Lodges, other fraternal and sorority organizations' meeting places, churches.

Unpeopled, the photographs in this project focus instead on suggestions of human presence inherent to the formative articulation of the sites themselves – in the tilt of facades along the contours of the land, in the symbolically redolent aestheticization of otherwise bare structures, in the earthen edges demarcating infield from out or court from yard – all only temporarily isolated after meetings, processions, play. Now observed in the context of the photograph, I am interested in what remains.

PRAXIS

In working out a kind of praxis at the beginning of this project, I wanted to explore the limits of these sites through a medium, also limited, in its isolation of space and time. Set apart, the photograph establishes edges that contribute to a concentration of sight in which what is seen remains along an incisive surface and only suggestive of what was without.

In photographing communal spaces, I was interested to work around a contingency of hospitality. I took at value the expressed sentiments of exclusive organizations in acting toward a public good, as well as more accessible communal sites' statements "all are welcome." I wanted to explore ideas of exception in a cultural complex with which I was familiar, but in which I was unrecognized, and with an approach also informed by study and travel to communal sites outside the region. Having grown up in North Carolina I was familiar with the lay of the land and the culture of communities in which I participated, but I wanted to see it photographically.

I also wanted to learn to photograph environmentally – by the light of the sun and toward initial sight or visual memories of site-recognition. It was partly for these reasons that I chose to work with a Nikon D90. This camera allowed ease in accessing sites and the digital accommodation of multiple images that gave me free range to explore.

This project works toward a praxis of seeking out light within sites and looking in to the limits of cultural constraints. It is from this complex of interaction, this contingency of hospitality, that these photographs are seen.

HUMUS

Humus is that sinewy rich compact of organic matter breaking down in a slow evolution to more minute and blended particles that become what is seen of the surface of the earth. In archaeology, it is this layer that is skimmed off to get down to subsoil and to potential features – artifacts.

I recognize an archaeology also at work in the site of the photograph. “In time only”, the photographs in this project are marked by features possessing a kind of suggestive substantiveness toward which indications of meaning often stretch and shift with viewers’ perspectives (Rauschenberg, 2). The fading cloud-lines, for instance, over Lake Phelps at Pettigrew State Park, Cresswell (figure 1) trace the interruptions in an open sky of Cherry Point Marines’ routine practice flight patterns over one of the largest lakes in the state. The photograph also offers, somehow, a slow resolve of the sky and of a low horizon, and how it is to be immersed in blue and the subtle tones of fading light, and flight. Or, in an otherwise calm environment, as evidence suggestive of preparation for potential conflict. With every viewing features fixed along the surface of photographs offer renewed potential toward curiosity or some more full understanding – their permanence enables an in-flux consideration both bound and informed by the incisive cut of the frame.



Figure 1, Pettigrew State Park, Cresswell, 2012.

My appreciation for the frame is influenced by the resonance of color in the work of William Eggleston and sight-lines in photographs by Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams. The critical vision of New Topographics, of which Adams and Baltz are considered part, is referred to by Larisa Dryansky in *Images of Thought* as an “aesthetic of duration”, a “reflective distance [in] creating images that slow down our gaze and go beyond the present moment while bringing attention to its stark reality” (Dryansky, 116, 120). Robert Adams’ approach to what he describes as the “dry, cold brilliance” of light on structures I find especially clear in *Methodist Church, Bowen, Colorado*, from the series “The Plains,” 1965-73, or *Sunday School Class, Colorado Springs, Colorado*, from his series “The New West,” 1968-71, (Dryansky, 114). In this latter photograph, Adams’ concise use of the frame, the briefly close-to-parallel lines of church roof to Front Range

suggest an extended relation of structure to topography, and an environment well-understood in the fleeting angularity of a harsh light enduring, now, in the photograph.

I find it to be also an “aesthetic of duration,” a slow approach to fixed sites that unearths features, potentially, as cultural signifiers and indications of habit; the observations that follow are only a skimming of the surface of the photographic plane (Dryansky, 116).

HABITUS

We experience architecture primarily in states of distraction; we live in it first and look at it second. Our contemplative gaze falls upon 'architecture' within a spatial world we have already imbibed and embodied. How do we recognize this unreflexive embodiment with the production of architectural imagery; everyday life with architecture as discourse? ...The habitus is both the condition for the possibility of social practice and the site of its reproduction (Dovey, 267, 268)

That these photographic sites are un-peopled is, in part, to open to the viewer a conceptual field free of the weighted and more immediately accessible presence of the human form. It is instead in human-scaled, recognizably functional or honorary spatial demarcations that the viewer is offered evidence toward questions of bodily accommodation, ease of access – care – for instance, in the glass enclosed wheelchair elevator in Soldier Bay Baptist, Ash (figure 2), or the Club Wagon church van of Second Baptist, Shelby (figure 3), or handicap parking spaces flanking a classically columned entablature as entry point to the American Legion 49, Hamlet (figure 4).



Figure 2, Soldier Bay Baptist, Ash, 2013.



Figure 3, Second Baptist, Shelby, 2013.



Figure 4, American Legion Post 49, Hamlet, 2013.

There are, conversely, particular indications of a lack of bodily activity extending beyond the time-confined instances of these photographs. Neglect opens questions around acts of architectural abandonment often preceded by communal disbanding and signaled in this project, perhaps, in the slow creep of weeds over an asphalt basketball court/parking lot in Pee Dee Baptist, Rockingham (figure 5), or the vacated patio around an open-face fireplace at an unidentified site in Atlantic Beach (figure 6). There are sites, however, in which current states of neglect and care remain interspersed – layered – for instance, in the clean white windows and smooth, fleshy façade that interrupt the stained roof and tough grass of Ambassadors of Jesus Christ, Fayetteville (figure 7).



Figure 5, Pee Dee Baptist, Rockingham, 2013.



Figure 6, Unidentified Site, Atlantic Beach, 2013.



Figure 7, Ambassadors For Jesus Christ, Fayetteville, 2013.

Throughout this project I was surprised to find structures without windows or any form of decorative embellishment – completely void of symbolic signifiers of use. In photographing these sites, I relied on signs stating names, affiliations, and in some cases, invitations to participate. I find this approach to aesthetically constricted communal spaces not necessarily devoid of hospitality, but contingent on depriving the uninitiated or uninformed of its clearly interiorly oriented experience. If care exists, it is posited within. These sites' lack of ornament and windowless exteriors conceal any suggestion of what goes on inside while, at the same time, emphasizing ritualized interiority in the singular functionality of the structure as shelter to an unseen space – Firstborn Baptist, Benson (figure 8), Beatitude House, Spring Lake (figure 9).



Figure 8, Firstborn Baptist, Benson, 2012.



Figure 9, Beatitude House, Spring Lake, 2013.

Similarly, the stucco-sealed, curtained, or windowless facades typical of Masonic Lodges and evident here, respectively, in Giblem Lodge No. 2, Wilmington (figure 10), LaFayette Lodge No. 83, Jacksonville (figure 11), and Pythagoros Lodge No. 6, Southport (figure 12), offer the architectural workings-out of an establishment that refers to itself not as a secret society, but “a society with secrets” (One).



Figure 10, Giblem Lodge No. 2, Wilmington, 2013.



Figure 11, Lafayette Lodge No. 83, Jacksonville, 2013.



Figure 12, Pythagoras Lodge No. 6, Southport, 2013.

In Fort Bragg Lodge No. 667 (figure 13), the impermeability of structure as barrier is physically evidenced in the blackened traces of foot and hand smears across steel doors embedded with the outward-only-looking feature of a peephole. Such indications of acts of bodily protest suggest a history of violence, or, contrastingly, preparedness for it in the ephemeral cloud-lines of Cherry Point Marines' practice flight patterns over Phelps Lake in Pettigrew State Park, Creswell (figure 1).



Figure 13, Fort Bragg Lodge No. 667, Spring Lake, 2013.

There are sites in which interiority and exteriority seem to mix – where the ambiguity of what goes on inside is more complexly alluded to by a symbolically redolent ornamentation of the outwardly visible structure. This sort of affectionate aestheticization can be seen, for instance, in the sculptural winged façade of

Iglesia La Luz Del Jesus Christos, Lumberton (figure 14), or the mottled surfaces of the lower half of God's Will Fellowship, Spring Lake (figure 15), spray-painted gold.



Figure 14, Iglesia La Luz Del Mundo, Lumberton, 2013.



Figure 15, God's Will Fellowship Church, Spring Lake, 2013.

There is a sense of hospitable awareness also in close considerations of communicative form – a kind of visual resourcefulness – in the doubled painted words of Mirror Image Tabernacle of Faith, Rockingham (figure 16), and the scratched-in “MAIL” on the metal slot and amended M/N in the “ONE WAY” wording of Grand United Order of Salem HQ, Wilmington (figure 17).



Figure 16, Mirror Image Tabernacle of Faith, Rockingham, 2013.



Figure 17, Grand United Order of Salem HQ, Wilmington, 2013.

Evidenced senses of experience are not limited to architecture – in sites publicly sanctioned as communal spaces it is often the lay of the land that determines ease of access and purposive specificity. The functionality of these topographies becomes less ambiguous with the intervention of sculpted asphalt and adapted bodily accommodations that interrupt rugged earth. Similarly, flat plots of land rounded and straightened to the contours of sports fields and playgrounds distinguish intent and site-specificity. And there are other communal spaces – sites open to access but only loosely maintained – where what remains to be seen is mostly the surface of the earth.

EXHIBIT

For the exhibition of this project I want to give viewers the opportunity to observe these photographs while also being environmentally and culturally immersed in a communal space. Lake Junaluska is the Methodist World Headquarters – a 1,200 acre conference center surrounding a lake created in 1912 for the purpose of distinguishing the site as an attractive mountain retreat for thousands of Methodists annually (Lake Junaluska). The photographs in this project will be shown in the Susan Todd Lounge of the Harrell Center at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, April 13, 2013.

There will be fifteen 12 x 18 inch color photographs. I am printing the photographs on an inkjet printer and find this size renders detail and allows the images the space to be seen. These photographs will be hung in white frames across a moveable wall in the center of the room and along two exterior-facing walls interspersed by windows and glass doors that open to the lake.

CONCLUSION

I found the working out of this project to be about the act of photographing. The initial limit to seek out communal spaces within the state lines of North Carolina opened up thousands of sites, to the extent that the work carried with it a curve by which I began to recognize light and line in distinguishing when to photograph. Color also shifted over the duration of this project – many of the sites I photographed initially were weighted by the jaundiced clay of Carolina subsoil and its shaped brick or stucco counterparts, and then I came across blue in structures and in sign-script and the sky. The complementarity of these colors clarifies isolated features while visually contextualizing each frame as part of a whole. In many of these photographs my vantage point was limited by the lay of the land or the proximity of surrounding structures: at the edge of Lake Phelps, (figure 1) for instance, or tight against the wall of God's Will Fellowship across the street from Beatitude House, Spring Lake (figure 11). It was also my physical approach that influenced the aesthetic stance of many of these photographs – the duration in space and time of a sense of hesitancy in looking back, or moving toward these sites.

In this sense, the socio-cultural praxis I set out with became almost supplementary to an environmental ground, but also imperative to the working out of this project. Questions of hospitality directly related to my presence remained, for the most part, unanswered in the absence of people at sites populated routinely but rarely. This praxis was addressed in a few instances by

people gathered at these sites who welcomed me or, – the exception – by security-faculty who disallowed me to photograph or be on the premises for fear of the threat of apostasy at a Fundamentalist Bible College off HWY 95S.

It remains from this complex of interaction between people and place, this contingency of hospitality seen in the effect of light on the land and experienced in revelations of cultural exclusivity or inclusion that the photographs in this project are offered up.

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