

Joan Nogué

Border landscapes

City limits

New land use dynamics, particularly urban sprawl, are blurring the distinction between town and country. New landscapes are springing up whose bounds are hard to define. The article reveals this new phenomenon, its causes and its undesirable consequences for regional planning, the environment and the landscape. The author also suggests ways in which the problem might be solved.

Geography has always asked why places are the way they are, why regions vary so much, what combination of nature and culture historically gave rise to the landscapes we see today. This question has led to another, namely what are the bounds of these landscapes? How can one define regions exhibiting a certain functional homogeneity and internal consistency? To what extent can one take a regional approach to geography? Geographers have spent a great deal of energy on defining regions and even more in setting their bounds.

The effort that has been put into this work is laudable and has led to some remarkable intellectual achievements over the years. Today we still try to catalogue the special features of each portion of the world and assign these

a regional identity. However, modern land use dynamics are blurring borders. This article looks at the new landscapes springing up along these fuzzy frontiers; their features and the radical changes that are taking place in them.

From clarity to fragmentation

The morphology of Spain's landscape has changed dramatically over the last fifty years. In the 1950s, land uses were sharply defined in geographical terms. It was easy to see where the city ended and the countryside began. Villages were compact. There were farms on the fertile plains around their edges and on nearby hillsides (where dry stone walls were often used to make terraces that could be tilled). Settlements were sited on

flood plains and farming was carried out on these rich lands. Wooded areas were confined to the highest areas and were surrounded by areas given over to crops. Rural zoning was clear-cut and produced compact settlements that followed an almost concentric pattern, with the village and farmhouses at its core, followed by an irrigated area for vegetables, an area for cereals, one for vines and olives, then pastures before reaching the woodland.

By contrast, today's landscape is highly fragmented. The zoning found in traditional landscapes has undergone radical transformation and land uses are now greatly dispersed. The old zoning scheme has dissipated and the dividing line between rural and urban spheres has become blurred at best. The result is a hybrid, a frontier landscape that is transitional, complex and jarring. It has become so hard to divine the nature of this landscape that one wonders whether there is any longer any *genius loci*, the enduring idiosyncrasies that lend places their precious identity, as David Lowenthal put it in his book *The Past is a Foreign Country*. The Spain that emerges from the USAAF aerial photographic survey of 1956 is indeed a foreign country, so great have been the changes over the last half century.

These hybrid landscapes mark transition zones between urban and rural areas. They are both chaotic and disquieting; leaving a landscape that is bereft of imagination and planning discourse. Both the speed and intensity of these changes render these areas very different from those that we are used to. The driving forces behind these new landscapes are urban, even though there are also rural elements (especially in the areas

furthest away from towns and cities). Such areas combine urban uses (the majority) with increasingly marginalised rural ones. The regional dynamics and their interactions are clearly urban and often metropolitan in character.

The causes

What we are seeing is the explosive growth of cities and their diffusion through broad swathes of territory as urban fallout reaches distant settlements, economic activities and services. Various terms and concepts have been used to describe this phenomenon. Although they are not synonyms, they nevertheless all point in the same direction. The terms include: the diffuse city; the dispersed city; the non-city; the meltdown city; the hyper city; urbanised countryside; rural-urban landscape.

Whatever terms are used, these new landscapes are a reality in which sprawling residential developments predominate, driven by various factors such as a change in the economic model; a crisis affecting public areas; the weight given to tertiary activities; new technologies; big differences in land prices in adjoining areas; new roads; a crisis affecting some elements of traditional cities. Although many of these driving forces are metropolitan in nature, one should note they affect much smaller settlements too.

Francesco Indovina makes an interesting observation, namely that we have entered a second stage in which land uses are being "metroplitanised" in a way that is regrouping settlements and diffusing urbanised areas. This complex integration not only affects economic life but also

social relations, daily life and culture. Indovina argues that in these new regional mosaics, metropolitan areas tend to create a *soft* rather than a *hard* hierarchy and that this leads to different kinds of links being forged between one or more centres with the rest of the region. Here, population movements are not one-way (i. e. from the periphery to the centre) but multi-directional. The trend is no longer towards concentration at a sole point (the central city) but rather towards distribution throughout a wide region and with various points of specialisation. These new metropolitan regions have multiple centres, some of which may have a lower profile than others but nevertheless play an important role in the greater whole. If it is hard to delimit these new metropolitan areas and their poles of attraction, it is practically impossible to pin down land uses in the new landscapes to which they give rise.

Development metastasis

There can be no doubt that along with large-scale infrastructure projects, the construction and property development sector bears much of the blame for creating frontier landscapes to the detriment of agricultural land uses. High-rise developments in seaside areas and on the outskirts of cities in the 1960s and 70s have been replaced by urban sprawl on a regional scale that affects not only metropolitan areas but also mountain beauty spots such as Cerdenya and Vall d'Aran in the Pyrenees.

Quite apart from the land swallowed up by such urban development, there is the totally anarchic siting of activities and settlements lacking any vestige of rational planning or link with compact urban settlements. This phenomenon

has been called artificial development or semi-development among other names and can be found on the outskirts of most major cities. Spain's Valencia province provides a shocking example of this kind of development.

In any case, the end result is regional fragmentation, and blighted look-alike landscapes in which banality holds sway.

The growth of urban land use (mainly for residential development) has been remarkable. By way of example, the built-up area in the Barcelona metropolitan region rose from 21,000 hectares in 1972 to 45,000 hectares in 1992. Put another way, as much land was gobbled up for building purposes in those twenty years as in all the preceding centuries.

This runaway development is even worse along parts of the Mediterranean coastline, where housing developments have sprung up in the middle of nowhere. As the geographer Francesc Muñoz recently demonstrated, in Barcelona province's 311 municipalities, no less than 75% of the dwellings built between 1987 and 2008 are either detached or semi-detached houses. Over 120,000 of the 368,708 dwellings built in the province between 1987 and 2001 are of these kinds. Quite apart from the way such developments blight the landscape, low-density housing spells total dependence on the automobile. The new housing estates have few services and constitute closed, uniform societies. It is symptomatic that 90% of the demand for burglar alarms in Spain comes from these new urban areas.

A landscape that is hard to interpret

It is much harder to interpret these new frontier landscapes than it is to grasp the nature of compact urban

landscapes. In his now classic work on the image of the city, Kevin Lynch (1960) highlighted the five categories needed to read a conventional urban landscape: paths; edges; districts; nodes; landmarks. What categories or keys allow one to read modern sprawls? There must be some that can be read from the car rather than on foot but they are no doubt more fleeting and elusive than those proposed by Lynch.

The semiotic reading of contemporary rapidly-changing landscapes is a complex task. It is hard to come up with a clear, logical discourse for these chaotic frontier landscapes in which everything is the same. They are spiritually impoverishing and make one feel that anything goes. The landscapes were reflected in the music and poetry show *PaísViatge*, performed by the Valencian group VerdCel led by Alfons Olmo Boronat. The Catalan writer, Toni Sala, uses the same setting for his novel *Rodalies* (The Suburbs). Other writers from the Catalan-speaking lands also set their novels in these depressing landscapes we see every day —a bewildering succession of row houses, wastelands, industrial estates, jerry-built constructions, detached houses dotted here and there, waste tips, car dumps, ramshackle storage areas, squalid plant nurseries, half-built houses, ugly unfinished side walls, electricity pylons, cell phone aerials, advertising hoardings or their rusting skeletons, piles of rubble and what have you. The last few years have seen landscapes change suddenly in character, losing all of their old charm in the process.

These areas are full of empty spaces that resemble nothing so much as a no-man's-land. Their physical limits are fuzzy and they are an uneasy mixture of what they once were and what they might

conceivably become. They are soulless, enigmatic places that have been banished from the channels of manufacture and consumption to which some but not all will one day return. Many of these areas and landscapes are the by-product of the modern industrial city, which is a law unto itself and unconcerned about its image. These wastelands between motorways have often served as bleak settings for action films and thriller novels. James Graham Ballard (2000, 2002) makes clever use of them in his novels and, as mentioned earlier, they are also a source of inspiration for new Catalan writers. Novels like *Crash* and *L'illa del cement* (The Concrete Island) are full of eroticism and violence and the car is used as a sexual metaphor and a symbol of the life led by the individual in contemporary society. They ruthlessly depict the most desolate and inhospitable parts of our metropolitan areas.

The complexity and spread of these frontier landscapes makes us realise that existing limits are not fixed as in the past but should rather be considered as hybrid points in the interplay of space and time. Perhaps it is time to make new proposals for organising this diffuse city full of wastelands. I believe it is high time these empty areas were given a key role in regional planning instead of simply being ignored.

We have to get to grips with the fragmentation produced by senseless urban development and return to clear boundaries. This is the only way of recouping the spirit if not the flesh of the landscapes that have been lost ■

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