

A look at landscape puzzles

Photographers offer perspectives for understanding environmental changes

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By Susan Llewelyn Leach

Landscapes were the first human texts, says Anne Whiston Spirn. "If I know the language of landscapes, I can read the world." Yet this world is in constant flux. Sometimes the evolution is a millennium-long affair, spewing volcanic rock into alien spaces; sometimes it's a few short hours, cracking ice on a frozen pond; sometimes it's an urban revival after decades of decay.

In an exhibition at Harvard University's Museum of Natural History in Cambridge, Mass., Ms. Spirn, a landscape architect, and two other professionals explore this transforming ebb and flow of landscapes and the patterns of human intervention ("Looking at Landscape - Environmental Puzzles From Three Photographers" runs through Jan. 7). All three, none professionally trained as photographers, come at their subject from freshly different standpoints.

Spirn is a philosopher artist and looks for metaphor and idea in her images of the natural environment. There are no humans in her shots, only traces of their presence: a rugged stone wall in the Scottish Highlands, a rotting barn spilling sand from its cavernous mouth. Each tells a story. It's "a condensed telling," as she puts it, like poetry. And each image, she says, poses questions: How did it get this way, and what might it become?

This element of time passing is particularly vivid in the photographs of Alex MacLean, an architect. For decades he has been documenting America's lands from the seat of his Cessna airplane. "[Stories] not told from the ground" is how he describes these aerial images.

Some of these patterns offer a stark view of sprawl around the country as new housing developments bite further into agricultural lands and wilderness. One in Las Vegas looks like Legoland from the air - row after row of tiny box houses in various stages of construction, and smooth, empty plots stretching out of the photo's frame.

Other MacLean photos show softer patterns - irrigation circles and tractor trails on farmland; lime-green algae aesthetically trapped between logs on a river; channels in a wetland that splay out from a central corridor into a filigree of green and black. What might seem random from the ground takes on unexpected symmetries from the air. His macro views also offer a unique survey of where and how Americans choose to live. "Housing says a lot about individual and cultural values," MacLean notes. And in this age of sprawl, what he notices is the apparent absence of the public domain, even though the housing boom "is fueled by government policies," he says.

The public domain is the subject of one of Camilo José Vergara's photos. The shot inside an abandoned library in Camden, N.J., shows three young saplings taking root among the fallen rafters and plaster. It's urban revival of an unconventional kind.

Mr. Vergara, a sociologist, has spent more than 30 years recording decaying cityscapes - minority neighborhoods far removed from the American dream. Yet even in these crumbling sections of a city, there's an ebb and flow of renewal that sometimes stalls the longer-term decline. One of several paired housing photos shows a well-tended, bright-red row house next to a boarded-up dwelling whose front door is scrawled with graffiti. The juxtaposition is startling. It's a landscape of opposites that raises the question: Which will win out? Vergara notes that in these poor neighborhoods the "official response was that recovery was just around the corner."

His most striking photos are a series of shots of the same street taken over several decades. In one series, an intact line of row houses gradually thins out as tenements succumb to fire and collapse. By the final shot, any fragile sense of community has vanished, and demolition signs dot the remaining buildings. Sometimes Vergara's photos are a record of what's missing.

Beyond documentation, however, photography is also a form of inquiry, Spirn says. And these three photographers raise new perspectives and questions about the interaction of people and their environment. It's a fluid dynamic that presents as many puzzles as it does clues to the future.