

An investigation into modernity, supermodernity, and the non-place.

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of BA (Hons) Photography in the Arts,
University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea.

19th April 2024

Word Count: 4011

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Summary of Topic

This thesis will explore notions of non-place within the urban environment, through a consideration of both modernist and supermodernist architecture. It will look at and consider the theories and writings of Marc Auge, Mahyar Arefi and Yi-fu Tuan, before how photographic artists Lewis Baltz and Marten Lange have captured and depicted the non-place, modernity and supermodernity within their works. Finally, this writing will introduce my own photographic practice which explores the non-place and how it can be engaged with.

Introduction

This thesis looks to explore the notions of the non-place within the urban (man-made) environment, within the context of both modernity and supermodernity. The writing will look at the architectural styles and features that have become popular within both western and eastern man-made environments over the past several decades, allowing for a contemplation on the reasons behind the placement and aesthetics of modern constructions and how their existence ultimately prioritises the facilitation of capitalistic consumerism whilst encouraging individualism and conformity.

The 'non-place' is a concept first introduced by French anthropologist Marc Auge in his work *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (1995). This writing provides an essential basis for the discussions held within this essay. Auge's definitions of the non-place allows for its concept to be understood and applied to a few different real-world examples. To help facilitate the discussion of the concept of the 'non-place', it is also important to also be aware of how 'place' is defined. It is the writing of Chinese-American geographer and writer Yi-Fu Tuan in his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977) which helps aid this understanding.

Chapter 1 focuses on defining these terms and looks at how the 'place' and the 'non-place' compare to one another. Alongside Auge, author Mahyar Arefi's writing in *Non-place and placelessness as narratives of loss: Rethinking the notion of place* (1999) provides further contextualisation and information that supports the understanding of the notions of non-place. The chapter focuses primarily on the theoretical discussion of the non-place within supermodernity, which is the current period of time which we are living in that prioritises economic growth and urban expansion. Supermodernity is unveiled as having a negative

effect on place, as its focus is on commodification rather than promoting connectivity within communities. Finally, within this chapter, the prevalent architecture of supermodernity is discussed as being universally recognisable and lacking in identity, which could be identified as a push for conformism within society.

In chapter 2 the non-place is looked at through the visual examples of photographers Lewis Baltz and Marten Lange. Baltz' body of work *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* (1974) shows a newly emerging man-altered American landscape which replaced open plains with industrial units. Lange's work *Ghost Witness* (2020), created almost half a century later than Baltz and in a different continent, shows the rapid shift of China's metropolises from the traditional to the supermodern.

Finally, chapter 3 will discuss the non-place as shown in my own photographic practice. It will consider how the non-place, specifically the carpark, can be engaged with unconventionally as a form of disregard for the desired consumerist behaviours encouraged by capitalist societies, and as a way to positively re-engage with the man-made environment around us.

The exploration of non-place within this thesis will hopefully allow for a better understanding of the concept and provide a footing for further research and exploration into the matter.

Chapter 1

In order to discuss the concept of the non-place, it is appropriate to first define what a place is. Relevant to the context of this essay, place can be defined in a couple of ways. Firstly, and in its most general sense, place is: “a particular position, point, or area in space; a location” (Oxford Languages). Secondly, and more specific to the context of the urban environment, place can be defined as: “a building or area used for a specified purpose or activity” (Oxford Languages). Place therefore is not just a building itself, but the area in which the building is. “Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning” (Tuan, 1977, p.387). Place becomes just that from the purpose provided by the people within it. Whilst place arguably has no absolute definition, its meaning and purpose is different for each person; their emotional, cultural and historical relationship with it forms a personalised relationship (Arefi, 1999, p.180). For an economic geographer place is defined as a location, whilst for a human geographer it is about the sense of place, the person’s attachment to it, the emotional connection; the way the world can be understood and perceived through individual experience and sensation (Tuan, 1977). Tuan is discussing how the individual’s interaction both with and within a place allows for meaning to be created. The experience of an individual is fundamental in whether or not the place forms any significant attachment.

In contrast, the non-place is one of transience and liminality. It is a place that exists in order to be passed through by the individual, only to be occupied for a brief or limited amount of time; as Michel de Certeau argues “‘a frequented space’, ‘an intersection of moving bodies’” (Auge, 2008, p.64). The individual enters the place not for the place itself, but for the

purpose that it serves. Therefore, the individual is unlikely to form any kind of emotional connection with the non-place itself, and instead typically unconsciously views the non-place as a means to an end.

In his essay *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, Marc Auge examines and discusses the role of the non-place within modern society. Within his work, Auge offers a definition of what constitutes a non-place: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Auge, 2008, p.63). Here, the non-place is characterised by its lack of three qualities. 'Relational' refers to the emotional connection the individual has with a space, and its ability to connect the individual to others; 'historical' refers to the context and purpose of a place within and throughout history; and 'concerned with identity' refers to whether or not the place holds any meaningfulness for the individual. Of course, a place can hold a different meaning and importance depending on the individual's personal experience with it.

A true understanding of the relationship between place and non-place and their definitions can arguably only be found through comparison. "Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsest on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten" (Auge, 2008, p.64). An understanding of these terms is therefore intertwined, their definitions connected and interlinked, which can be made more understandable through an example. A bus station can typically be defined as a non-space. It's a place which is frequented by numerous people on a regular basis. Some individuals enter and exit the bus station multiple times a day but are unlikely to pay any attention to its ambiances. It

solely exists in order to allow them to get from point A to point B; it is a means to an end. Their role within the space is that of a commuter, and there is no intention to occupy the space for any longer than need be. The receptionist of the bus station's help desk, however, holds a different relationship with the space. For them it is their place of work; they enter the space and remain within it for several hours at a time. This transforms the non-place back into the place, as it holds qualities for them that are lacking for others. A connectedness or sense of belonging and purpose creates a place for the person experiencing this emotional connection.

Increasingly within contemporary society the evolution of building and development has impacted negatively on place as a location, creating as Kunstler (1993) describes "a loss of connectivity" and a "change in social obligations" (Auge quoted in Arefi, 1999, p.181). With the emergence of a new urban environment fixated on supermodernity, the meaning and concept of place has altered. Previously defined through its purpose, place within the urban landscape is now a space for commodification and devaluation, a location for economic transactions questioning whether place is still important as a concept. As a location, place loses part of its definition; the criterion of place is no longer the emotional significance to a person but rather its ability to facilitate consumerism and commercial interaction; it is no longer the quality of the connection but rather the quantity of the connections. Place in these terms can be associated more closely with non-place. As Auge (1995) argues, the new urban landscape revolves around solitary obligations such as using ATM machines rather than the contractual obligations that used to define a place such as the collective behaviours and shared values (Arefi, 1999, p.182). The place within supermodernity is prone to lacking its relational sense, relegating the ability for human connection in place for a focus on capitalistic engagement. "Rather than social centres where communities gather for collective

activity, non-spaces function as common places where groups of people come together yet experience the space separate from others” (Steer, 2005). Although highly populated with people these spaces involve solitary practices such as being on mobile phones whereby negating the need or desire for social interaction.

Within the age of supermodernity, there is an increasing uniformity found in the architecture between one city and the next. Cities are becoming increasingly homogenised, where character in architecture is subsided for what is seen as supermodern and globally recognisable. This, arguably, is the dismissal of visual architectural identity and uniqueness in place of the bland but universally recognisable. These supermodern buildings lack the historical element that Auge argues is one of the defining factors of what makes a place. Understanding and studying space from a humanistic standpoint, a person’s feelings of space are quantified through their own experience (Tuan, 1977, p.388). It appears fair to say that supermodernist buildings contradict the values of humanist architecture. Of said buildings, there seems to be a consistent lack of ability for their architecture to affect a positive emotional response within the individual. The emotional reaction when engaging with this type of architecture is often one of indifference or even disdain; these buildings fail to provoke feelings of joy when viewed or engaged with. Designer Thomas Heatherwick argues that “... we're increasingly surrounded by characterless buildings... I believe we're living through an epidemic of boringness. Everywhere is the same – dull, flat, shiny, straight, inhuman” (Hobson, 2022). The idea of (supermodern) architecture being ‘inhuman’ implies a lack of care and feeling going into its design; there is a coldness to them, perhaps comparable to that of the dystopian cityscapes of sci-fi films set in the not-so-distant future.

Ultimately, this style of architecture seems to elicit a repression of creativity and a socio-cultural push for conformity.

The introduction of supermodernity into urban spaces has created conformist places lacking individuality and identity.

...we are most likely to find prophetic evocations of spaces in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense; spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality, in which only the movement of fleeting images enables the observer to hypothesise the existence of a past and glimpse the possibility of a future (Auge, 2008, p.70-71).

The creation of a building with no identity nor history causes a loss of meaning and connection for the individual and across society as a whole. The emergence of characterless buildings whilst enforcing economic expansion, is at the expense of human connectivity.

With this the understanding of place has been transformed, with placelessness emerging and meaning lost (Arefi, 1999). Supermodernism has “disrupt[ed] the emotional attachment to place” (Arefi, 1999, p.183) with the new commodification of place emerging. The implementation of uniformity and standardisation in urban development whilst removing identity, character and connection can also be seen as a method of control and repression, which is something that will be considered in chapter 2.

Chapter 2

Lewis Baltz was a contemporary photographer, perhaps best known for his works within the New Topographics movement of the 1970s. Baltz's work during this period focused on the newly emerging American man-manipulated landscape, made-up of industrial units and suburban sprawls. In his body of work titled *The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California* (1974), Baltz highlights "nature and people in uneasy coexistence as economic prosperity transforms the landscape into profitable units" (Manchester, 2003, p.257). Landscape photography up until this point in time had consistently focused on the beauty of the natural – flowing rivers, serene meadows, and rugged mountain ranges. Yet in an era of rapid industrial expansion, these landscapes were becoming increasingly altered by human interference. The photographers of the New Topographics movement documented these changes through photographing in a neutral, matter-of-fact manner: "reduced to an essentially topographic state, conveying substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion, and opinion" (Mickevicius, 2020).



Fig. 1: *Foundation Construction, Many Warehouses, 2892 Kelvin, Irvine*

Figure 1 exemplifies the changing landscape of late 20th century America. The viewer is presented with a vast open space, newly occupied by foundations on which warehouses are soon to be constructed. Baltz's photographs take on a documentary style and approach, not dissimilar to his New Topographics contemporaries such as Robert Adams, Berndt and Hiller Becher. It is a traditional capturing of the environment in terms of technique and composition, but it's subject and content were significant as they were not typical of what constituted a landscape photograph.



Fig. 2: *Road Construction, Airport Loop Drive, Costa Mesa*

Baltz was essentially capturing America's rapidly appearing non-places. These places, industrial parks and car parks, were being built away from pre-established towns and cities, and consisted of "elegant, Bauhaus-style buildings, off-street parking, hidden loading docks, sidewalks and landscaping – everything belonging to an apartment complex except the people" (Rian, 2001, no page number). Within this section of Jeff Rian's write-up on Baltz, it is highlighted how well-built these structures were in comparison to certain homes, despite the fact that very few people would be occupying them (or even going near them) at any given time: "these were places built for machines and machine operators" (Rian, 2001). For the typical individual, these industrial parks and their buildings epitomise the non-place. To refer to Auge's definition (1995), they lack any sense of the relational, historical, or concern with identity. They exist within the field of industrial expansion, built to feed the aim of economic growth and capitalist expansion. Yet for the common individual, these buildings

and spaces are restricted and therefore mysterious. Their interiors often off-limits, one is only left to speculate what exists behind their façades.

Figure 2 displays Baltz's approach to photographing these buildings. Many of his photographs within this series are directly facing the front of his subjects, creating a focus on the form and shape of the structures being presented. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SF MoMA) describes New Topographics' style of photography as "unromanticized views of stark industrial landscapes" which show "everyday scenes not usually given a second glance" (2010). Ultimately the New Topographics' focus on the mundane and banal within suburban environments predetermined the soon-to-be rapid worldwide expansion of the supermodernist landscape. Clare Manchester writes of Baltz's work as "devoid of figures but speak[ing] of human presence: they are a sceptical commentary on economic expansion at the expense of environmental preservation" (Manchester, 2003, p.257).

In the following half-century since Baltz documented these industrial parks in California, the man-made environment has continued to spread rapidly. Cities have expanded both vertically and horizontally, with certain architectural forms rooting themselves as staples of the urban landscape across the globe. Swedish photographer Marten Lange's body of work *Ghost Witness* (2020) showcases a modern-day China that has undergone (and is continually undergoing) intensive urbanisation. The subtext of the work is the difficult relationship that China has between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. Through his series of monochrome photographs, Lange focuses on and isolates various forms and structures that make up the country's dense urban metropolises.



Fig. 3: *Ghost Witness*

Figure 3 depicts one of the six cities that Lange photographed in during the creation of *Ghost Witness*. The photograph features clusters of high-rise buildings, densely constituting one of China's mega-cities. However, it appears difficult to discern which city is in focus, as there is little visual information presented to the viewer that could help them identify it. Instead, the viewer is faced with numerous high-rises hardly differentiable from one another, especially the further into the distance one looks. Lange's use of perspective emphasises this – shot

from high-up using a telephoto lens, the buildings appear especially clustered together. The size of their huge structures is undermined, appearing as if they're handmade parts of a city's set being used as a backdrop for a sci-fi film. It could be argued that the dominating size and appearance of these buildings contribute to a feeling of insignificance for the individual. The vast visual similarities between buildings signifying a desire for conformity and repressed individuality.

The use of black and white photography makes it difficult to interpret whether the haze present is a natural fog or a man-made smog, or a mixture of the two. Likewise, the lack of colour depicts the mega-city as one that is lacking in nature. The fog/smog encapsulating the city makes it impossible to see just how far it extends to, huge skyscrapers are transformed into barely traceable outlines. It creates the impression that the urban environment is a place that is never-ending, both in place and time.



Fig. 4: Varied Ambiences.

Figure 5 is a photograph taken in a carpark in the centre of Swansea. The carpark is a non-place, it exists much like the bus station (as exemplified earlier within this essay) to be used and passed through by the individual, but not to be occupied for any extended period of time. It can be argued that the multi-story carpark's main reason for existing is to facilitate consumerism. Carparks are typically located within a close vicinity of several places where consumerism can take place, such as retail parks and shopping centres. Both of these locations consist of a concentration of shops, ATMs, and places of leisure (such as cinemas, bowling alleys) where the individual can engage with numerous transactions of goods and services. The shopping centres are often well-maintained, viewed proudly almost as a 'centrepiece' within the makeup of the city. However, the carpark is notably typically less

well maintained. It's interior makeup often consists of grimy walls and off-putting stairways. They are semi-neglected, maintained to some limited extent which keeps them functional of their purpose of allowing individuals to move between one point to another. However, they seem unworthy of the time, money, or energy to be brought to up to an exceptional standard. Afterall, they are not the destination but the link to the destination.

It can be argued that it is the lack of maintenance and disregard of appearance of the non-place that creates an alluring element of intrigue for them to be engaged with unconventionally. For example, carparks are often used by skateboarders as their concrete surfaces offer an ideal setting for skateboarding. This kind of engagement with the carpark is an act of transgression, a rejection of their intended facilitation of capitalism in place of a freedom of individual and community expression.

From a photographic perspective, the urban non-place offers nothing that could be conventionally deemed worthy of photographing. If anything, these places could perhaps generally be described as 'ugly'. These places consist of a variety of strange forms and figures such as unkempt wiring and electrical boxes that seem as if they are not meant to be viewed by the general public. It is like being exposed to an urban underbelly that is supposed to be off-limits but is open to be observed regardless. The assumption presumably made by the owners of these places is that no one would be remotely interested in stopping to observe these spaces, and even if they were to that it would cause no harm. It can be argued that the act of observing these spaces is an act against the status quo. It is an act that might be seen as unusual, but of no real concern. A step beyond the observation of the non-place is an engagement with it. In the case of the skateboarder this is skateboarding or 'hanging out' within the space, whilst for the photographer it is the act of photographing.

These may be seen as more 'disruptive' behaviours within the non-space, which may be more likely to be discouraged, for example by a security guard.

To actively engage with the non-place is to transform it into something new. The place becomes relieved of its transient nature and is claimed, if only temporarily, for creative engagement and expression. It can be argued that in these circumstances the non-place becomes a place again for those engaging with it. However, it will ultimately always remain as the non-space, as its intended purpose and function remains the same. This type of engagement differs from the bus station receptionist given as an example in chapter 1. Unlike the skateboarder or the photographer, the receptionist has an official authority to occupy the non-place.

Conclusion

Through researching and considering the theories of several writers, namely Auge, Tuan, and Arefi, the notions of the place and the non-place have been able to be applied and considered with regards to my own photographic practice, as well as that of photographic artists Lewis Baltz and Marten Lange. Through this exploration, it has become apparent that supermodernity has become widespread and especially noticeable in cities across the globe. The architecture of supermodernity is universally recognisable, from the U.S. to China to the U.K. This globalisation seems attributed to a capitalism that primarily concerns itself with economic expansion and the facilitation of consumerist behaviour. Coincidentally, supermodernity has led to a loss of certain factors within the man-made environment that are essential in the defining of the place. That is to say that buildings constructed within this current age are often lacking in such factors, and therefore has led to an increase of non-spaces throughout the urban environment. These non-spaces are notably defined by the loss of connectivity that they offer the individual, as community engagement has become replaced by individualistic behaviours. The place within supermodernity is frequently now being built or reappropriated with commodification as its main (if not only) purpose.

Lewis Baltz's *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* can be seen as something of a starting point for the global movement towards supermodernity, as previously natural and untouched landscapes outside of the city became occupied by industrial parks and units built to aid economic growth. These places are built not for people to engage with, but for workers. It can be contemplated whether the emergence of such places can be deemed worthwhile from both a humanist and ecological point of view.

Shifting focus towards the city itself, in this case the metropolises of 21st century China, Marten Lange's *Ghost Witness* highlights how urban expansion is not only focused on expanding outwards, but upwards. This is through the construction of countless highrise buildings, notable for their similar appearance to one another, not just within a city, but within cities across the country and also the globe. The consistent visual identity of such buildings can arguably be seen as a rejection of architectural innovation and experimentation, in favour of a new standard of recognisability. This loss of identity when considered with the purpose of supermodernity (commodification) can be interpreted as a push for individual conformity and loss of identity.

The final discussion within this thesis focuses on how the non-place can be engaged with in a way that challenges, or at least rejects a capitalistic desire for commodification within the urban landscape. By occupying and engaging with the spaces that are not intended to be occupied or engaged with, the individual can begin to transform the non-place back into the place. Not in its intended capitalistic context, but in a way that returns and transforms them back into spaces for creative expression and community connectivity.

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