

In the Shape of the Margin: An Urban Group's Intervention on Peripheral Landscapes

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From Istanbul to Los Angeles cities across the globe are undergoing radical transformations through the rapid accretion of unplanned urban development and spiraling population growth. Traditional cities are being radically transformed by these marginalized populations, as historic communities build themselves into virtually fortified encampments. Many contemporary urbanists and planners tend to diagnose such extreme conditions as symptomatic of some kind of urban malady instead of recognizing the emergence of new variant forms of urban space and culture. Today's peripheral territories and the communities that inhabit them are constantly being re-shaped by the rapid fluctuations brought about by post-cold war trans-national economic interests and the mediatized global consumer culture. Extreme differences in cultural identities, economic access, and communication speeds only exacerbate the levels of incompatibilities within the same spatio-temporal landscapes. I would like to make the point here that the only way to engage the peripheral subject is to invent a new critical language capable of instigating new formulas for treating vestigial properties, abandoned territories, infrastructure corridors, and the fast growing migrant and nomadic populations who seek to inhabit them.

But it is not enough to give recognition to these eccentric or uncharted areas and their scattered communities. It is just as essential to establish a *modus operandi* that could begin to accord these zones specific value in relation to their unfamiliar but clearly vital sense of place. The greatest difficulty so far has been to transcend the kind of traditionally processed statistical data that tends to flatten the complex relationship between landscape and human experiences. Instead, a more compelling transition from speculative to applicative strategies is taking shape through the efforts of the Rome based urban laboratory *Stalker*, whose work is the focus of today's paper.

There are two themes that loom large over this group's work. The first is the physical relationship between the central core of the city and its corresponding areas of abandon, a relationship that is actually critical to balancing human and natural ecologies. Rome, after-all, has some of the densest residential quarters in Italy, mitigated precisely by the presence of these large inaccessible open expanses that splice through the capital's urban fabric. The second deals with the substrata of largely "alien" communities that have gravitated to these areas long overlooked by official city and regional agencies. The latter condition can only be discovered through persistent ground observation. While *Stalker* never turned over their reports on their encounters with local authorities,

their increasingly predictable run-ins with hidden inhabitants clearly influenced *Stalker*'s attitudes on just how important such landscapes really are to Rome's other less visible society.

Crossing these territories was not without its risks. The members of *Stalker* had to climb over walls and fences, as well as a myriad of physical hurdles. Though many harmless sheep still graze these areas, dogs were a constant threat. Nonetheless, there were always pathways trodden, clear signs of frequent use. *Stalker*'s mapping of these areas succeeded in creatively rendering these landscapes through their cognitive voyages.

James Corner considers landscape to act metaphorically for a range of human based activities, noting that:

"...landscape may still embrace naturalistic and phenomenological experience but its full efficacy is extended to that of a synthetic and strategic art form, one that aligns diverse and competing forces (social constituencies, political desires, ecological processes, program demands, etc.), into newly liberating and interactive alliances."

But how does one synthesize such a complex set of factors that seem to jostle together in ways that are not always intelligible, or at least intelligible according to the standard tools of observation that have so far served to catalogue land use?

Stalker's contribution lies in their conception of a more sensitive set of observational tools that more closely bears witness and documents existing conditions while simultaneously constructing an ephemeral architecture of passage. Using city plans, satellite maps, video recorders, cameras and diary entries, the group of artists, architects, urban critics, astrophysicists, theorists and philosophers chose to engage their "subject" through direct on-the-site confrontations. The group's name was borrowed from the 1978 Andrei Tarkovsky film "*Stalker*" a Soviet era production that followed several explorer's trespass through an irradiated underworld. The film portrayed a quest that blended mesmerizing landscape with the search for forbidden knowledge and spiritual enlightenment.

The group *Stalker*'s organized wanderings have succeeded in highlighting the important presence of today's abandoned territories and their place in providing vital sanctuaries for numerous communities dwelling within the margins of large city centers. Their four-day founding event, a circuit through the interstitial territories around Rome completed in October of 1995, was initially motivated by a number of

objectives, some quite clear, others consciously irreverent. They pay homage through their actions to the Situationists, the early American pioneers of "land art" and engage in contemporary theories on landscape and urbanism. Stalker attempts at the same time to force a break with that part of the architectural discipline that is locked in a static formalist discourse. The group resists the restriction of the fixed context in favor of an open and dynamic engagement with the landscape.

Quoting from Stalker's Manifesto:

"Stalker is a collective subject that engages research and actions within the landscape with particular attention to the areas around the city's margins and forgotten urban space, and abandoned areas or regions under transformation. These investigations are conducted across several levels, around notions of practicality, representations and interventions on these spaces that are referred to here as "Actual Territories." Stalker is together custodian, guide and artist for these "Actual Territories." In the multiple roles we are disposed to confront at once the apparently unsolvable contradictions of salvaging through abandonment of representation through sensorial perception of intervening within the unstable and mutable conditions of these areas.

This act of building pathways across "actual territories" is important precisely because it becomes a means of actively "knowing;" creating without in the process destroying.

Rome continues to harbor endless examples of human creativity and despair. And though Stalker's objectives have more recently moved beyond Rome, the city remains a focal point in their research. These areas under their survey remain largely ignored by architects and urban planners. But Stalker's deliberate explorations into these parallel worlds are admittedly controversial. By marking the marginal territories inside Rome, Stalker draws attention to areas that could be potentially "abused" by speculators obtusely insinuated between the private sector and the state.

Several projects conducted by the urban laboratory Stalker will be discussed here: the group's defining event that mapped the abandoned territories inside the capital where Stalker hiked over the course of 4 days without ever stepping inside Rome's densely built-up quarters. The second project grew in part out of the first, in that the exploration of Rome's interstitial territories revealed a far more intensive level of undocumented habitation than was initially assumed or previously estimated. Thus their later project on political refugees, the creation of a Kurdish center, deals with a specific homeless population and Stalker's attempt to establish a staging area for contact and referral. Stalker, recognizing the broader implications of undocumented migrations, widened its activities to address European dimensions. The nomadic populations that insinuated themselves within these areas belong to a much larger regional phenomenon that pits waves of political and economic refugees against the growing backlash of harsh nationalist anti-immigration policies. Stalker's focus logically expanded into the very borderlands of Europe itself. The extension of the Kurdish project became a series of interventions along national frontiers. Finally the third Stalker project presented here skips across the Atlantic to Miami Florida, where the group tackled the expressly American phenomenon of closed ethnic neighborhoods situated either side of the Miami River.

In 1995, the Stalker group mapped a passage around Rome that skirted past the city's dense urban landscape. Rome is one of the largest working agricultural capitals in Europe and the city's footprint resembles a series of finger extensions that hug the same corridors first laid out as consular roads from Rome's ancient Empire. Stalker created a map of the city that inverted these expansive green landscapes into a blue sea of open movement. These formed archipelago like areas that could be physically linked in one continuous route around the entire city. The group's four-day walking and camping trip attracted the national media, chiefly by drawing public attention to largely ignored swathes of open territory within the city's borders.

Stalker left no lasting trace of its passage, but merely gave testimony to what was there: a place where rail-yards, unfinished highways, buried aqueducts, high tension electric lines, crumbling bunkers, obsolete subway tunnels and outcroppings of Roman ruins were to be found overlaid and overgrown in the forgiving Mediterranean climate. These vestiges of modern culture, scattered across areas that are hours apart on foot but traversed in seconds on the highways above, were woven into the most recent layers of an urban-like sedimentation that continues to grow outside the interests of their legal jurisdictions.

Stalker's increasing commitment to transient populations is evidenced in their project "City of Differences" involving around a hundred Kurds, who first popped onto the national stage when they set up a cardboard city across from the Coliseum. The Kurds had followed the arrival to the capital of Ocalan, their political leader living in exile. The cardboard city about a few hundred square meters in size represented a civil experiment purposely calling attention to the plight of the Kurds. Before the cardboard city was dismantled by police, this improvised settlement was a rare example in social place making. The city featured a small restaurant, tearooms, barbers and spaces for food. The forced dismantling of their cardboard city was not accompanied by official alternatives for relocation. Stalker took the initiative in 1999 to invite this Kurdish community into the ancient ex-slaughterhouse in Testaccio, where the group recently established a working base.

From Stalker's own account of how the Ararat was born in the Campo Boarium:

On May 21 the offices of the ex-veterinary, a building abandoned to heroin addicts and physical degradation was occupied to experiment in a new form of public space founded on open access and hospitality. A space through which to directly verify the relational potential between artistic activity, civil solidarity and the transformation of a territory. The building was re-baptized with the name Ararat, a legendary mountain that emerged from the universal flood, symbol of exile to the Kurdish refugees.

Stalker views this ex-slaughterhouse complex as "...one of the strange folds..." that create "...boundaries" consisting of "... heterogeneous fragments of space and time different from the rest of the city." Known to Romans' as the *Mattatoio*, set within the Campo Boario, it is located where the ancient roman port on the river once flourished. It is now bounded by rail tracks, aqueducts, and converted warehouses. Under the long-term tutelage of the left leaning community center *Villaggio Globale*, a whole program of social events and activities gradually transformed the ex-slaughterhouse over the period of a decade into a refuge for transient communities. Having been permitted to occupy a building in the complex, Stalker invited the Kurdish community to transform the Stalker building into a Kurdish center. But the lack of long-term prospects for the site, its tenuous living conditions, the frequent tensions between the different ethnic communities sharing the space and the crumbling infrastructure were clearly concerns to all the groups involved.

Taking the lead, in part to forestall private speculation threatening the area, Stalker sponsored an international competition for October of 2000, with the intent of soliciting creative strategies for the transformation of the site consistent with the kind of activities and conditions that appeared so vital to the area's long term survival. During the summer, students from across Europe and the United States convened at the ex-slaughterhouse to attend a series of workshops and lectures provided to introduce the area to the competition participants. On weekends, the Kurds served meals to finance their cause, while additional funds were raised through a series of popular musical events and art performances.

The final winners for the competition were selected in early October and were put on exhibit, and can be currently viewed on Stalker's website. While working on the *Mattatoio*, Stalker developed

prototypes for its newest generation of projects, building the first in a series of “transborderlines,” coiled tubes running about a hundred meters and large enough for people to gather inside. According to their manifesto for the exhibition, Stalker transformed the symbol of barbed wire into a smooth tube that took the shape of the barbed wire’s spiral, but now thorn-less. Prototype of a possible future public space born from the “unfolding” of borders, the installation was designed to create an ideal place “to approach diversity.” A public space dealing with heterotopic notions of community, the thorn-less tubes play with borders, with the border’s symbolic value and their in-crossible nature.

The border is that ensemble of distances and differences that divides us from those who arrive from a forced journey abandoning one’s homeland. This ensemble of distances and differences have not yet found spaces in which to unwind itself, remaining for the most part impassible.

Finally the most recent series of projects that have taken Stalker out of Italy have continued to explore these issues focusing on xenophobia and its spread across the continents. Stalker in Miami was part of a major project organized by the MiamiArts project and sponsored by the NEA, the Andy Warhol Foundation, and the Knight Foundation. The first installment of the project was titled “Meantime, Meanspace,” and dealt with the numerous active drawbridges crossing the Miami River. The nature of the rivers’ drawbridges visibly synchronized to the River’s commercial life acts as the connecting tissue in Stalker’s project to draw distinct neighborhoods together. The cacophonous rhythm of the rising and lowering of the drawbridges form a sort of counterweighted ballet with the river and its human traffic.

The river is the place that divides the city culturally with Little Havana on one side and Overtown on the other. These divisions reflect what the River signifies today: a “meantime and Meanspace” just like a border. Today, borders like this are taking up more and more of our time and space. We believe that in a maturing multicultural and semi-nomadic society, borders will become the most important public spaces of the future. They will be places where differences face each other and start to relate to each other, places that are now considered a waste of time can become spaces for pleasure and interaction.

The culminating project in Miami, exhibited at the Locust gallery in January of this year, was the transformation of the game of dominos popular among Cuban Americans. Stalker mounted an aerial of the grided city on an enlarged domino set: Miami’s 63 ethnic groups were encoded onto the game-pieces in substitution of the usual configuration of dots. As the game is played the city’s fabric is rearranged along with its ethnic groups, stimulating, it is hoped, a greater awareness of the city’s diversity.

While Stalker has been criticized for being neo-romantic, or being over obsessed with “trash landscapes,” if I can use this latter to term to describe a very real post-modern anxiety, there are really not that many alternatives to this kind of on the ground approach. With so many cities long evacuated of their authenticity, the future seems only to dwell in those marginal areas where the energy of urban culture has now come to rest. Lorenzo Romito observed recently that the only projectable operations on the city of Rome today are ephemeral, spectacular, while the long-term interventions are increasingly rendered obsolete well before the fruition. To transcend this impasse, we need to take a sober look at that other side of town where eternity and instantaneity seem to cancel one another out.