

The Deactivated Landscape

Catherine Slessor

On 15th November 1983, the first cruise missiles arrived in Britain from the United States. I remember the occasion perhaps more vividly than most as it was my 23rd birthday. At the time I was a student studying architecture in Edinburgh and I still recall the front page of *The Times* for that day, which bore a photograph of a missile convoy trundling slowly and solemnly through the English countryside. This event was an audible ratcheting up of western European firepower, bringing in its wake the increased possibility of nuclear conflict. Like a mythical sleeping army to be roused *in extremis* to defend the nation, nuclear arms were destined to lie in subterranean bunkers across the land, waiting for a moment most sane people prayed would never come.

The early '80s was one of the most apprehensive eras of the Cold War, characterised by an elaborately orchestrated warfare of speculation and imagination, backed up by rapid technological advances. Weapons were engineered to be more powerful and more deadly over a greater geographical range. It was an era of threat and counter threat, of scenarios that thought the unthinkable, of sabre rattling and stockpiling, of firepower and statistics, of a world on the brink, of weapons primed and targeted, but ultimately, never to be used.

As one of the defining phenomena of the late twentieth century, the Cold War touched the lives of my generation and many others before and since. The convoys of imported cruise missiles crawling through the leafy lanes of the English shires were the dismaying but rational outcome of an ideological conflict between the competing doctrines of capitalism and Soviet bloc communism. The seeds of this protracted geopolitical stand-off were sown after the Second World War when Europe was carved up between the Allies. From the late '40s onwards, the Cold War formed the backdrop to many spheres of national life – political, economic, scientific, and cultural – periodically coming to the fore in times of increased tension between the two major superpowers. By the 1980s, both East and West had assembled nuclear arsenals of inconceivable power, giving each side the potential to annihilate life on the planet many times over. It was argued, especially in the West, that as long as a lethal parity was maintained, neither side would risk launching a pre-emptive attack. This policy became known as mutually assured destruction or MAD. Rarely has an acronym been more appropriate.

Compared with the Aldermaston marchers or Greenham Common protesters, my youthful anti-war activism was at the less demanding end of the scale. I tagged along on a few marches and during one CND rally in Hyde Park took part in forming a huge, human CND symbol. It made a good picture, as did the images of women breaching the perimeter fences at Greenham Common, but it was perhaps naively optimistic to think that such mass protest, however cleverly choreographed, made much of an impact on the workings of government and the military industrial complex. Yet by the end of the 1980s there was a profound shift in the political climate across eastern Europe that signalled the long-hoped for thaw in East-West relations and the eventual end of the Cold War. The dismantling of the Berlin Wall,

that most potent expression of the ideological divide, in late 1989 dates it definitively. From that time on the world was different.

As the communist grip on eastern Europe finally eased and the Soviet Union fractured into individual nation states, the West found itself in the position of having to reassess its defence needs. Across western Europe, there has been a massive reduction in both military expenditure and the area of land occupied by armed forces. By the mid '90s, the Ministry of Defence had identified more than 100 major sites in England surplus to its needs, from naval dockyards to airfields and munitions factories.

The effects of this downsizing and political glasnost has been to open up hitherto inaccessible complexes and buildings to wider scrutiny by both agencies and individuals. English Heritage, in particular, has done extensive work in the field, tracking down and documenting the physical legacy of the Cold War, culminating in a major study published in 2003 (*Cold War – Buildings for Nuclear Confrontation 1946–1989*). This admirably detailed survey analyses the different types of military buildings that have evolved over the last 50 years, from bunkers to radar masts, and attempts to put these unique structures into some kind of military, architectural, and cultural context. It also examines current strategies for their preservation and re-use in the post-nuclear era.

As well as the documentary programmes of official agencies, individual artists have also responded on their own terms to the newly accessible sites, focusing both on built structures and how these relate to the surrounding landscape. Twenty years ago it would have been a treasonable offence to take or publish the photographs in this book. Now, in a measure of how times have changed, we can go beyond the perimeter fences into what were once some of the most prohibited places on earth.

In his exploration of disused military bases deep within the English countryside, Frank Watson assumes the guise of a latter day archaeologist; persistent, meticulous and intrepid. His pictures are simultaneously evocative and disturbing glimpses of a highly secret and sensitive world, now changed and transformed for ever by wider events. These are perplexing fragments of a lost civilisation, nourished and sustained by a particular vision of military confrontation, but finally rendered impotent and irrelevant by the course of history. Once home to the means of mass destruction, the great bunkers and hangars now lie neglected and abandoned, their weapons and personnel gone or redeployed, their moment passed.

Watson admits to being fascinated by the notion of modern ruins and their presence in the landscape. We are apt to romanticise old castles as picturesque relics but, as Watson points out, their real purpose was one of defence. The Cold War structures of the present age are a modern expression of that historical continuum, but in Watson's photographs there is little sense of romanticism. His gaze is still and unwavering, almost analytical, in the tradition of photographers such as Bernd and Hilla Becher whose surveys of industrial structures evoke the surprising beauty of utterly functional objects.

Yet there is also something palpably disquieting about these mounds, bunkers, hangars and fences. Shot in the languorous heat and stillness of late summer, they sit marooned in a bleached and parched landscape. They are always set at a distance from us. Their functions are unclear, but they are distinguished by their massive scale,

simple geometries and blank, hermetic exteriors. Here and there, some incongruous artwork hints at a military connection and tribal associations. Bereft of human presence or animation, they are singularly enigmatic. They do not return our gaze.

Watson's sequence of images begins with perimeter fences and sentry posts, defining territory and staking out the protected ground. These boundaries mark the point between civilians and the military, the public realm and the protected inner sanctum, and their transgression became a resonant aspect of public protest. One of his visits to Greenham Common Watson recalls seeing fragments of ribbon still flapping from the perimeter fence, placed there by protesters over twenty years ago. Once beyond the wire, we are in unfamiliar territory. Flat ground planes strafed by weeds pushing weakly through acres of tarmac are articulated by the hulking topography of monolithic bunkers, hangars and sheds. We have no idea what went on inside them. Some could be ancient burial mounds or redundant agricultural buildings, others have become part of the landscape, slowly transformed by nature into an extension of the horizon. Though they are only decades old, they seem to have been there forever. They have a geological permanence. They are growing into the land.

In the early 1950s, in his pioneering work *The Making of the English Landscape*, William Hoskins lamented the devastation of the countryside by scientists, soldiers and politicians. He saw his world dominated by the 'obscene shape of the atom-bomber, laying a trail like a filthy slug upon Constable's and Gainsborough's sky. England of the Nissen hut, the pre-fab and the electric fence; of the high barbed wire around some unmentionable devilment'. Half a century later, we are beginning to see what lay behind the fences and how the English landscape was remade in a very specific way, shaped by human and mechanical intervention to contain and maintain the threat of war. When Watson embarked on this project he wanted to give some sense of what this threat once looked like, to give form to the omnipresent dread that used to casually seep in and around our lives. The result is a vision of slightly sinister desolation and slow decay, a mausoleum for Dr Strangelove. It seems almost hard to believe that these banal structures, now softly and stealthily being overtaken by nature, were once crucibles of colossal and deadly military might.

Today the new world order dictates different priorities. The lumbering, lethal certainty of the Soviet threat has been superseded by more nebulous menaces which demand highly mobile forces able to react both to geographically limited conflicts and defend against new agile smart weapons. Despite the attractions of a clean, swift nuclear strike, which was intended to do away with the messy protracted business of fighting, the capacity for conventional warfare is still needed more than ever. Within the UK, defence deployment is moving away from the heavily militarised landscape of the last fifty years in which superbases for airborne armadas replace the great nineteenth century naval dockyards as launching pads for overseas expeditions. The immobility and rigidity of the Cold War era as manifest by its buildings, sites and military planning has given way to more flexible and responsive strategies. Watson's series of photographs concludes with a shot of a vast expanse of runway meeting the bald, white horizon head on, sky and earth colliding and conjoined in an infinite rush of space. Stencilled on the runway is the prosaic legend 'DISUSED DEACTIVATED'.

Unlike other art forms, architecture is a slow, collaborative process. Buildings must be programmed, planned and paid for, and so become powerful embodiments of culture and society. They also endure over time, forming repositories of human deeds and actions that connect us with the past. Contemplating the remains of ancient civilisations we wonder what kind of people built these places. Buildings tell us about ourselves, how we lived, who we were. Stripped of their military and political connotations, these Cold War relics are monuments from a more recent and troubled age, but they also tell us things about ourselves; things that we might not always feel comfortable knowing.

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