Representation, Destruction and the creation of Territorial Islands

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Abstract: Issues of demolition and redevelopment are normally justified in quite straightforward terms such as upgrading or redevelopment. Implicit in many instances of demolition however, is an alternative claim on territory and a different spatial ideal. This paper explores the politics that often shadows acts of demolition - an associated terrain of displacement, separation and exclusion. Beginning with the selective representation that was a driving force in the demolition of a notorious slum area in East London this paper will go on to consider the impetus behind the construction of territorial islands, internally ordered and bounded places that form and migrate or are deliberately implanted into alien situations, constantly at odds with their surroundings.

The impact of unresolved encounters and struggles between people threaten basic assumptions about inhabitation. People migrating across national boundaries with different belief systems and world-views often seek to impress new identities onto existing places and cultures. For those there already the sense of interior is interrupted by the arrival of others. They must struggle to maintain stability as daily routines and activity are curtailed, moulded and adapted to a changed environment. For newcomers, energy and resources are often expended on establishing new rules and conventions and in maintaining a protective skin. Jacqueline Rose has written about how, with such movement across national boundaries ‘you are just as likely to carry your enemies with you’. Nothing is ever simply left behind and this ‘baggage of the mind’ often surfaces as ‘fierce blockading protectiveness. This paper ultimately will address the way people struggle to make room for themselves in places that are crowded with conflicting claims and open to different interpretations. It will examine the way ideas are carried from one space to another.

Introduction

The modern political project is made up of two complementary actions: the domestication of the state’s interior, based on a disciplinary politics and an idea of cultural hygiene, and the exclusions of the outside, with which it finds itself in constant violent engagement.¹

The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble.²

Radical change, carried out through acts of demolition or substitution requires both a profound ethical conviction and a concrete idea for what will follow. To replace an existing structure with something quite new and often strange has far reaching effects on concepts of place and time. Demolition is normally justified in quite straightforward terms of upgrading or redevelopment; however, an associated terrain of displacement, separation and exclusion frequently shadows such acts. The ghost of ‘colonialism’, usually involving removal,
dominance and alternative ideas and claims on territory, often accompanies this terrain. Colonies habitually begin with the creation of territorial islands – internally ordered and bounded places, usually set at odds with their surroundings. Imagined as places of ‘fresh start’, they create ‘otherness’ externally while simultaneously domesticating and cleansing the enclosed territory. Such places form and migrate or are deliberately exported and planted into alien situations.

This paper will explore the way ideas are carried from place to place on the back of acts of substitution and removal. It will also confront the way language operates to prepare the ground for such movement. Language in the form of selective representation has an intrusive, authoritarian quality, which can assume the most tangible shape and motivate significant political activities. It can formulate justifications for acts while at the same time simplifying the moral and emotional contradictions that may be encountered.

Words, as Robin Evans has suggested, may be used to construct a fiction on the body of something real, and in the following case words have played a significant part in preparing the ground for the acts of removal and substitution that occurred. Consider this opening passage from Arthur Morrison's novel, *A Child of the Jago*.

It was past the mid of a summer night in the 'Old Jago'. The narrow street was all the blacker for the lurid sky; for there was a fire in a farther part of Shoreditch and the welkin was an infernal coppery glare. Below, the hot, heavy air lay a rank oppression on the contorted forms of those who made for sleep on the pavement: and in it and through it all there rose from the foul earth and the grimed walls a close, mingled stink, the odour of the Jago.

From where, off Shoreditch High Street, a narrow passage set across with posts gave menacing entrance on one end of old Jago Street... There, the Jago, for one hundred years the blackest pit in London, lay and fettered... Old Jago Street lay black and close under the quivering red sky; and slinking forms as of great rats, followed one another quickly between the posts and the gut by the High Street, and scattered over the Jago.

This is a vision of hell, a scene of fire with buildings in silhouette, populated by skulking forms, like rats, moving around. The novel is situated in a fictional area almost identical with the district in the East End of London known as the 'Old Nichol' and was published just as that notorious slum was being demolished, at the end of the 19th century. Morrison stated that his theme for the novel was ‘violence and despair’ and he portrayed the Jago, as a monstrous enclosed world from which there was no escape. The book was peppered throughout with allusions to the polluting effects of the slum and the inhabitants not being fully human. One conversation in the book, between the Reverend Sturt and the physician advocated penal settlements and emigration for the inhabitants along with measures to constrain their reproduction. Morrison's novel was full of moralising and it was subsequently attacked for its simplistic treatment of the area.

Early photographs in fact, show that the 'Old Nichol' was an area of badly built, but rather ordinary one and two-storey houses, collected together in enclosed blocks along narrow streets and alleys. Rundown, dilapidated, but hardly a fortress of crime. Ordinance survey maps from that time reveal it was surrounded by a number of institutions such as churches,
ragged schools and a police station. People who had lived there told interviewers of the Salvation Army being a familiar sight on the streets. The notion of impenetrability appears to have been something of a fiction. The London County Council made its own maps and found that some of the housing was in a reasonable condition. They also reported that a strong family structure was present in the area. The chief activity in the district was not, as Morrison claimed, ‘cosh carrying’, but the making of cheap furniture. Arthur Harding was nine when Morrison’s book was published and in an interview recorded in 1970, he described the experience of growing up in the ‘Old Nichol’

The Nichol was a place on its own. There was hardly any traffic, the children could go anywhere and have no fear of nothing. The coal carts didn’t go fast, the chimney sweeps, now they knew everybody. The result was that it was a close-knit community and everybody knew everybody. 8

Morrison’s excitable prose produced an artificial aura of romance, exaggerating events and circumstances. In fact, from Hogarth through to Dickens, London’s slums in the 1840’s were portrayed as dreadful, but also fascinating because they were dangerous, mysterious and incomprehensible to outsiders. To police and other authorities they were no-go areas. In essence they were closed guarded districts owned by aristocratic landowners but sublet over and over again so that these landlords were able to claim little responsibility or control over them. Full of interstices and hiding places, they provided perfect urban landscapes for people to hide, and for outsiders to become lost. Connections made through houses, party walls smashed through at all levels and networks of tunnels and ladders provided a protective web for the unofficial, unsanctioned activities of the area.

A ‘language of metaphors, analogies and contrasts’ 9 was cultivated to give flavour to the detailed factual descriptions of these areas carried out by the nineteenth century reformers who ventured there. Words like hellish, subterranean, submerged, netherworld, chaotic, infestation, decay and labyrinthine occur again and again among their reports and statistics. These ideological distortions were transferred to questions of morality under the rubric that ‘evil communication corrupts’. Cholera was, a major concern, threatening to break out of the slums and enter as ‘an uninvited guest’ into the homes of the wealthy. The analogy between the spread of vice and the spread of disease has been well documented. Immorality and disease were conflated and bound to particular areas

where the dangerous classes are to be found amongst the chronically poor and dispossessed, crammed into a congested, dilapidated fabric and ‘surrounded with vice as with the atmosphere’. 10

Reports of Parliamentary Commissions of the 1840’s and 1850’s show an obsessive concern with the immoral and primitive nature of the urban poor. John Greenwood, among the earliest wave of sociologists who travelled widely throughout the British Empire, wrote popular accounts of everyday life in remote regions and then made comparisons between ‘primitives’ and the life in London’s poor and impenetrable areas

The language of the explorer had been overlaid with that of the ethnographer, and the city seen through these analogies was cut across with ethical as well as physical boundaries.11

One-room living was a key issue where ‘no distinction between persons or events, public or private, was possible and in which, as an inevitable consequence, vice flourished like
disease. Investigators compiled statistics in order to enhance the picture. The causes of poverty were explained in terms of dissolute habits and disordered lives played out in a correspondingly amorphous terrain. Philanthropist Octavia Hill noted:

The peoples homes are bad, partly because they are badly built and arranged; they are tenfold worse because the tenants’ habits and lives are what they are. Transplant them tomorrow to healthy and commodious homes, and they would pollute and destroy them.

Morrison’s novel along with earlier literature produced by the reformers provided a ‘political cutting edge’ for those who sanctioned the wholesale demolition of the real slum and the displacement of its inhabitants. The publicity enabled the creation of a new set piece in the area. It was one of the first clearances by the London County Council where the slums were literally smashed to death. The most efficacious method was to cut streets through them in order to ventilate them and open up the enclosed life.

A new urban form, one of the first ‘model’ housing schemes was planted in the area. It bore no relation to the pre-existing layout, completely obliterating any trace the ‘Old Nichol’. The rubble of the old slum was collected into a central circular podium (a symbolic repository of memory), and the new housing blocks and avenues radiated out into the surrounding area. This central podium, Arnold Circus, featured a bandstand where bands of Her Majesty’s forces would play for the local residents on Sundays. In form it resembled a Panopticon, an architectural instrument of control and generalised surveillance used to focus a supervisory gaze. This arrangement, organised around an all-embracing view was in chorus with notions of transparency and hygiene. In the aftermath of the ‘ripper’ murders in nearby Whitechapel, a pathological fear of darkened spaces existed in the East End.

Redevelopment of the 17 acres of ‘The Old Nichol’ caused the displacement of 5500 people and in the seven years that it took to demolish, nothing that had existed before survived. In the 1893 Ordinance Survey map the district appeared as a white, blank space, reminiscent of the blanks appearing on old colonial maps as uncharted areas. This amounted to a conceptual cleaning of the ground, a blank canvas ready to be inscribed with a different form of occupation.

The enclosed slum of the Old Nichol was replaced by a newly invented island of semi-rural life in the city based on principles of the self-sufficiency, (isolation) of each family group. Built at the height of the British Empire, the housing blocks were named after towns on the upper Thames and the new avenues were named after military generals. The unifying factor was a red brick construction in a sort of arts and crafts style and the buildings themselves presented a different kind of fiction as they took on the appearance of individualised dwellings. ‘Only fifteen of the 1069 new tenements were one-room dwellings whereas the Nichol had 752 single rooms housing nearly half its population’, and just eleven of the original Nichol inhabitants moved into the new buildings. There was no obligation for the LCC to re-house the displaced residents and in fact the new buildings were designed for a class above the very poorest with rents not more than double that paid by the Nichol inhabitants. The new tenements were eventually occupied by the next wave of immigrants into the East End of London.
One means of resolving the ‘slum problem’ was presented in the ‘Model Houses for Four Families’ project designed by Henry Roberts in 1851 under the patronage of Prince Albert. Robin Evans has suggested that this project showed ‘the various ways in which architecture was to be deployed against low-life’. Through training of the tenants and the consequent assurance of prompt rent payments, it was argued, investors would be encouraged to finance housing for the poor.

This aim of shaping experience through the medium of building was intended to directly confront issues of criminality, noisiness and lack of restraint and to customise stereotypes such as that of women and domestic space. Small, enclosed territories of domesticity were created at a time when domesticity was seen not just as the proper condition of families but, often, as superior to all other varieties of social experience. The Model Family was the Private Family. In the ‘Model Houses’, families were separated from other families, spaces for traffic were separated from spaces of privacy and a further separation between boys and girls was based on a layout able to facilitate a measure of surveillance. It was a process of social colonisation – an attempt to remake the poor into an image of English Middle class domestic life. Not exactly alike, (there shouldn’t be a blurring of class boundaries), but close enough to exhibit a reassuring respectability. In the words of Homi Bhaba, ‘Colonialism’s ultimate desire is for a reformed recognisable ‘other’ as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.’ As Evans pointed out ‘the choice was not just between good and bad housing, but between two radically different ways of life.’ These Islands of intimacy and domesticity were exported throughout the British Empire as outposts of civilisation, described as a retention of England outside itself. Although exalting in their civilising enterprise they were in reality a reiteration of the most conservative paths or voices, evoking nationalist, classist and racist narratives.

In 1971, Robin Evans chronicled ‘the strange way human beings attempt to render their world inhabitable by circumscribing and forgetting about those parts of it that offend them.’ He depicted two distinct, but not mutually exclusive ways to achieve this, retreat and exclusion. The first way, the way of retreat involves

the withdrawal of participants into the privacy of brave little communities of utter individual autonomy... It can be understood as the provision of a mantle to envelop the inhabitants within a familiar landscape populated with sanguine mementos – a place to correspond with, and therefore vindicate, our ideological prejudices.

The second way, ‘exclusion’, attempts to fence off and exclude those elements that cause stress or the possibility of disharmony. These two conditions, retreat and exclusion, (one usually also implies the other), rely on the forces of imagination, projection and ideas about idealised communities. The Old Nichol embodied both retreat and exclusion. It offered protection for those seeking refuge or escape. The perceived impenetrability of the slum was set against intrusive forays by authorities in pursuit of felons or debtors. The Nichol was also a zone of ‘outcasts’, long regarded by those on the outside as housing an immense, teeming, and formless population, dramatically different from the world that surrounded them.

Lines drawn around particular groups can generate a capacity for an exaggerated sense of group solidarity combined with a passionate hostility to outsiders. The progress of the ‘Old Nichol’ from unruly formlessness to tamed domesticity, arose from what Derek Gregory has described as ‘the double-headed coin of colonial modernity’, on one side, a partitioned,
hierarchical and disciplined space, and on the reverse, a primitive, wild, mysterious and excessive territory. Although there was an urgent need to address issues of overcrowding, dilapidation, decay and insanitary living, fear was a compelling factor in decisions to demolish the slums. Fear partly engendered by the violent outbreak of disease (such as occurred in Spitalfields in 1837), and fear of working class movements. The possibility of unrest was perceived as a growing threat to the middle and upper classes and ultimately to national security.

Fear, Jacqueline Rose suggests, ‘generates an identification with somewhere else. It travels. And, in doing so, it becomes its own fortress’. Fictional constructs and mythic narratives have the power to create powerful group identities. Sometimes acted out as a claim for a return to an imaginary past these narratives may be used to erase other memories and identifications. The language that inflamed fears of slum dwellers is a language of ‘realism’, long regarded as a dependable means of representing the world. It is full of certainty and conviction, containing connotations of Empire and suggestions of boundaries between ‘known’ and ‘other’.

A more recent example of this language, characteristic of the Bush era ‘War on Terror’, was recorded in February 2002. Efraim Eitam, a retired Israeli brigadier general, and ex-commander of the IDF army in Southern Lebanon, spoke at a major international military conference, in Haifa, Israel attended by geographer Stephen Graham. With around 30 urban warfare specialists from the Israeli Defence Force and United States and British forces in attendance, this event addressed the links between war and cities in the twenty-first century. In his presentation Eitam argued the spontaneous construction of Palestinian housing and refugee camps within both Israel and the Occupied Territories, was a ‘cancerous tumour destroying the ordered host’ of the Israeli state... we are dealing with the use of urban areas as weapon, the building as weapon.

Graham argues that fear of Palestinian built and urbanized spaces reaches very high levels among Israeli military leaders and commanders. Eitam, a leading member of the Israeli settler movement, has advocated persuading or forcing Palestinians to leave the West Bank to be resettled in Jordan or the Sinai. The idea that places and people are a source of infection touches upon deep cultural insecurities, putting the notion of threat into the mode of disease – as a cancer or plague – poisoning the ordered body from within. Such language is part of a recurring ideology of separation – the civilised, ordered and hygienic world set apart from the unknowable, closed, nests of disorder danger and terrorism.

Projecting places as dark, impenetrable irrational, full of dehumanized, subjects encourages a domesticating or cleansing mission and legitimises violence against both the everyday urban life within those places and the systems, which sustain that life. The wholesale destruction visited recently on towns and districts such as Fallujah and Sadr City in Iraq, Jenin, Nablus and Gaza in Palestine, the Tamil enclaves in Sri Lanka and numerous other places, are testimonies, ultimately, to the power of such representations.

Issues of exclusion and retreat that confronted the reformers in the slums in the late 19th Century are now more pronounced. Today, migrations occur on all continents. They are producing multiple crossings of external borders that have resulted in local resistance and
reaction leading to more borders. A new phase of ‘Fortress Building’ confronts the contemporary world caused by a combination of fear and distance. Definitions of insider and outsider now stretch beyond national borders. Certain groups, such as asylum seekers and refugees have vastly increased in numbers and are now assigned global identities.

Separated territorial islands spring from a desire to extirpate and remove the root causes of disarray. They have appeared in the form of settlements, refugee camps, military zones and gated communities. Places set apart, often fortified at their edges by a range of security apparatuses, walls and barriers, separate ‘the other’ from the same. Meir Margalit describes the deliberate fragmentation of a formerly unified region caused by the implanting of settlements into existing communities in Palestine.

Taking control of space’ refers to a much broader concept than merely the appropriation of physical properties. A single settlement structure invades the entire surrounding space; its impact is felt over and above that one building due to the security system associated with the structure, spreading a pall for the residents. A single house or an entire compound becomes a fortified site in the finest colonial traditions of the nineteenth century - a gated community in the 21st century.

The settlement brings with it security fences, guard-posts, closed circuit cameras security personnel and police forces that monitor every movement of the existing inhabitants. The character of the space changes from a peaceful living space to a conflict zone. A settlement not only fragments the territory by creating isolated and separated enclaves, causing a break in the physical surroundings; it also destroys the homogeneity of the community. As horizons have shrunk and new frontiers are scarce these new territorial islands have become the agents and operative figures in a form of re-colonisation of existing places.

The impact of unresolved encounters and struggles between people threaten basic assumptions about inhabitation. People migrating across national boundaries with different belief systems and world-views often seek to impress new identities onto existing places and cultures. For those there already the sense of interior is interrupted by the arrival of others. They must struggle to maintain stability as daily routines and activity are curtailed, moulded and adapted to a changed environment. For newcomers, energy and resources are often expended on establishing new rules and conventions and in maintaining a protective skin.

Derek Gregory has shown that ‘representations are never merely mirrors held up to the world; they enter fully into its formation.’ Language plays a major part in preparing the ground for territorial islands to emerge. Words have an ability to condense, simplify, and represent something in dramatic terms, able to grip the imagination of social groups. However, this simplification ultimately lends a porosity and uncertainty to the territorial island that no amount of demolition, removal or securing through boundary or identity can hide or repair. The following passage by Israeli novelist David Grossman describes the narrowing effects that words of certainty and conviction have for those caught up in such alienation and conflict.

From experience I can say that the language used by the citizens of a conflict to describe their situation becomes flatter and flatter as the conflict goes on, gradually evolving into a series of clichés and slogans. It starts with the jargon invented by the systems that handle the conflict directly – the army, the police, the bureaucracy. The trend spreads into the mass media, which create an elaborate, shrewd language designed to tell their audiences the most palatable story...The process eventually
seeps into the private language of the citizens...All that remains are the clichés we use to describe the enemy and ourselves – the prejudices, mythological anxieties, and crude generalizations with which we trap ourselves and ensnare our enemies. The world indeed grows smaller.

Endnotes

8. Interview recorded by Raphael Samuels.
11. Evans, ‘Rookeries and Model Dwellings’, 98.
15. Evans, ‘Rookeries and Model Dwellings’, 96.
18. Evans, ‘Rookeries and Model Dwellings’, 111.