Beyond Landscape

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my diary of landscape

As an architect engaged in postgraduate research in a department of geography where I am surrounded by physical geographers, historical geographers and cultural geographers, I have spent a large portion of the past few years submerged in various writings on the term "landscape". Covering as broad a scope as possible, my reading has led me into many fields of exploration. From art critics to academic geographers, from historians to landscape architects, it appears that each group has a different take on the meaning, position, and approach to landscape. The deeper and deeper I have gone into these areas, and other writings, the more muddied my understandings have become. It feels as though my own once-clear understandings of what landscape is, or could be, are becoming lost in a mire amongst these competing meanings. Landscape: A cultural construction? A social process? A physical thing?

I attempted to bring these varying meanings together in the writing I completed a few months ago. Yet I am not at all satisfied with that text. I cannot find my own position within it. It does not serve its purpose for me: to further, and clarify, my understandings through the thoughts, ideas and writings of others. For me, landscape, this dynamic and contested concept of a highly interdisciplinary nature, is not comfortably, nor easily pinned down into such a piece of rigidly constructed academic writing. Is there another way?

"to be interdisciplinary you need be between two places, but how exactly is the relationship constituted? is the interdisciplinary operator who straddles two, one who maps the tears and the rifts, the places where things have come apart, and the overlaps and the joins, the places where things
come together. or has s/he come from elsewhere, arrived as a stranger in town? the experience of being someone new in town, is a different experience altogether. here one place has been left and a new unknown terrain entered. what do you do? match the new to meet up with the standards of the old, or allow yourself to be changed by your new surroundings?" (Rendell, 2002).

Looking at my approach to research work, and to writing, a cycle or pattern seems to be emerging. Periodically, I produce an academic piece of writing in progress, learning to do so in as conventional a manner as possible. And immediately afterwards, I find myself needing to let off steam in a more confessional type of piece...like this one is turning out to be...

making land

Eighteen months ago, in January 2004, I began to construct a model of part of the Dingle Peninsula in Co. Kerry - one of the research sites for my thesis. Having spent a number of months conducting research in methods entirely new to me, (out there in another discipline, being that "someone new in town"), I felt the need to return to a way of working with which I was very familiar, a way of working that felt comfortable.

I bought a piece of 15mm plywood, had it cut into a square of 800mm x 800mm, and, taking Sheets 70 and 71 of the 1:50,000 Discovery Series, I began to draw. Tracing out every fifth contour marked on the bluey-green Ordnance Survey maps, I began a process of elimination, deciding what, and what would not, appear in my horizontal depiction of this piece of land. A multicoloured series of curving pencil marks developed: from Tralee in the east, to Brandon Point as it dips into the Atlantic in the west, and from Inch Strand in the south, to Kerry Head in the North, I plotted the extent of my model. My pencil began to mark the mountainous ridge as it crawled above the lower slopes of the peninsula's spine. I was clear in my aspirations for this model from the outset: my elimination of settlements and rivers was very deliberate. I wanted to concentrate on the form of the land: its rising and falling, its meeting with the sea. In other words, I wanted to build the ground. Just the ground.

walking land

Fifteen months ago, last Easter Sunday, the 11th of April 2004, I, along with a group of friends, attempted to climb Mount Brandon, the second highest peak in the country, rising to 3127 feet on the Dingle Peninsula. The visibility was poor as we drove through the village of Cloghane and the drizzle persisted as we began to walk up towards the clouds as they rolled over, around and about us. Damp and muddy, the initial incline pressed into my already tired legs, and I quickly fell behind the main group of walkers. Needing verbal encouragement all the way along the early part of the slopes, I walked almost reluctantly, filled with negative thoughts that I would not be able to make it to the top.

Each time I neared the group, they moved off again. Eventually they rested long enough for me to reach them. Turned towards me, they were looking over my head, back towards where we had come from. Looking to the east, the clouds having lifted off this lower part of the mountain, we could see Tralee Bay and Brandon Bay and the sandy Maharee peninsula pushing northwards, dividing the two bodies of water. Looking off the mountain, its elevation transforming it into viewing platform, I photographed the distant views. Using the camera's zoom function, I could not see the ground I was standing on through the lens. The land itself disappeared as I worked to (re)present my experience of it.

writing land

Etymologically, the word topography means the writing of a place. It combines the Greek word topos (place) with the Greek word graphein (to write) (Hillis Miller, 1995: 3). This text is writing the ground of Brandon Mountain. Thus this text is topography, in its original form.

The way up the steep slope turned in on itself. Moving from what felt like the outside, to the inside of the mountain, we turned into the west, as the path carved its way right into the rock. Ascending in a slower, more horizontal manner, our
View off Mount Brandon eastwards (on walk)

Mount Brandon (on walk)
path was perched mid-way along a wall of this rock. No longer on the (out)side of the mountain, and suspended vertically on this wall, it felt as though we were walking into the depth of a mountainous room. With the clouds now swirling above the summit, concealing it out of sight, and the ground falling sharply to a corrie lake below as it formed the floor of the room, hard on my right was the steeply rising slope, close to vertical in its gradient. Stopping, and looking to my left towards the opposite wall, far across the open, I could see the mirror image of the steep presence on my right flattened out, presented before me: horizontal sheets of rock raised, lifted and angled by some unknown force of time and might. A jagged wallpaper of mossy growth, lichens and weathered stone.

I took a photograph. Across.

Looking again at this photograph that I took, the scale is very difficult to read. It is as though the wall, isolated from the physical mass of the mountain, and communicated as an image, becomes something else. The view, (the scape), confuses the nature of the land.

**body ground**

As I moved forwards, further and further into this external in-mountain room, I slowly found myself back with the pencil in my hand, tracing and re-tracing the stepping contours on the Discovery map. It suddenly hit me! I could place exactly where I was! The ground I had drawn, re-drawn, cut, glued and looked at rise, layer by balsa-wood layer, was here beneath me. I was now (re)registering every contour that I had cut, but now with my feet rather than with the point of the scalpel. It all made sense to me! This steep ridge, curving into the slope, had been tricky to draw, cut and glue, level above level. Now land and its landscape came together, through me, through my body. I, physically, was the point of contact. I had made the connection through the act of walking carried out by my legs and the act of cutting made by my hands.

Now at the back of the mountainy 'room', the realisation of this bringing together of the physical and its representation through my own body's move-
ments really excited me! I knew now I would make it to the summit! The last part of the ascent, the vertical rough scree, required four bodily points of contact with the mountain. My hands, previously needed to navigate the landscape, were now need-

ed to navigate the land. The connection between land and landscape was finalised. My physical experience. Me.

blurry landscape

In our contemporary world, the term landscape is so ubiquitious that its usages, for me, end up blurring all boundaries of its definition. Has the word landscape taken over from the word land? Are the terms land and landscape interchangeable? I look back to the piece of writing I completed those few months ago, to two writers I quoted in my text. The art historian Malcolm Andrews writes, "something significant has happened when land can be perceived as 'landscape'" (Andrews, 1999: 1). He talks of land being processed into landscape, and landscape being processed into art, and concludes that, "Landscape...is mediated land, land that has been aesthetically processed" (Andrews, 1999: 7).

The literature specialist John Moss writes, "Can you envision a difference between landscape and the land?...The land is whatever is there independent of human
awareness; the condition of nature as entirely separable from human perception, from human experience. Yet that is not quite so... The land is human-scaled, a projection of how we could imagine the world to be, if we were not here. It is a projection of our absence, the denial of Kant and his heirs: self-realization of nature without human knowledge. If you accept this, then the land, as defined, is a concept familiar to people in times before Stonehenge and Eden: if you think yourself a creation of the world, the land is the context that precedes you. But if you think your monoliths, whether of rock or theology, centre the world and empower your dominion over its destiny, then the notion of land is beyond you. You are stuck in landscape, Wittgenstein's world perceived, Hegel's inevitable completion of human design. So to return to the question, the actual difference between landscape and the land is not important. That you can see the difference at all is what counts" (Moss, 2000: 63).

I have, many times, visited, walked, sunbathed, slept, and driven across the Dingle Peninsula. Now, I have a timber version of the Dingle Peninsula in my room, sitting on my bookshelves, angled against the wall. By making this model, was I representing a piece of land? Was I representing a piece of landscape? Or...was I making a landscape? By taking a photograph on, and of, Mount Brandon, was I representing a piece of land? Was I representing a piece of landscape? Or...was I making a landscape?

Landscape? ... For me, the question mark remains.
Endnotes

1 This article was first published in Building Material, Spring 2005.

Bibliography


