

Prospection 02 – James Dixon

A Visual Manifesto for the Archaeology of Construction

This submission for the Prospection 02 archive box is an attempt to move beyond documentation as a primary concern of my time on the North-West Cambridge, although documenting change remains an important part of the project and one that happens easily through the collective.

Here, I attempt to use the time on the site to make a difference to archaeology, one specifically arising from Prospection 02. The point at which we visited the site this year is very distinct as it is perhaps the time at which our access and ease of movement around the site is at its most restricted. We are already aware that the construction period of a building or site is the part of its existence that is most precarious in terms of present knowledge and preservation. This short piece attempts to capture some of what makes that short time what it is, using the visual as an acknowledgement that the most any of us can do in these circumstances is to take photos to think about later.

Although a response to Prospection 02, this work is also inspired by other work I have encountered this year. Firstly, the exhibition *Art and Archaeology: the silent voices of material and soil* at The Museum of Kyoto, Japan, 23 July to 11 September 2016, curated by Toshio Matsui, Sahoko Aki, Oki Nakamura and Masakage Murano. Here, one room of the exhibition presented what amounted to another visual manifesto for an artistic-aesthetic approach to archaeological objects in museums. Through a series of displays of restored and partially restored objects and other objects showing museum interventions such as typology or grouping or pieces, the exhibition presented a series of short statements that seemed to explain well a way of approaching museum objects (mostly ceramics in this case) that moved beyond the traditions of archaeology/museums/heritage and instead explored artistic inspiration and the way that the aesthetics of heritage intervention have their own agency. I will write on this in more depth elsewhere, but I think the words work as a list on their own. The list of titles is as follows:

- Silent white
- Admiration for cracks
- Beauty of blanks
- Having charm in truth
- Something unexpected
- Beauty of a restoration
 - The Birth of Venus
- Beauty of a recumbent vessel
 - Suspend operation
 - Beauty of a gathering
 - Beauty of the bottom
- Admiration for your appearance

I also take inspiration from *Unearthed*, a project and exhibition curated by Douglass Bailey, Andrew Cochrane and Jean Zambelli at the Sainsbury Institute in 2007 (although I didn't get a copy of the book until this year!). Here, the group took the provocation of a comparative study of Jōmon dogū and Neolithic figurines to explore the variety of interpretations of such objects across archaeology

and art, and the creativity that can arise from that process. Among the key themes explored by the project were:

- Portrait
- Bonsai
- Miniaturism
- Barbie Doll
- Stereotypes
- Cropping
- Anatomical dolls
- Mutedness
- Malevolence
- Dismembering the body
 - Looking
 - Exhibitionism
 - Masks
 - Simulacrum

Here, as in the Kyoto exhibition, we can see the potential for a varied approach to archaeological material where we intentionally look beyond more traditional tropes of interpretation and presentation to investigate something that as well as adding to that tradition and expanding it for present and future practitioners, is also able to have its own existence without having to rely on formal archaeological involvement at all.

For this response to Prospection 02, I have taken specific inspiration from the above projects, but also from the site itself. After our initial walk around on Thursday 13 October I wondered if maybe I was lacking in inspiration. But I gave some thoughts to my Prospection 01 photographs and to those I had taken that morning and decided to give some thought to why I take photos of the things I take photos of and what I can learn from that as an archaeologist. I decided to categorise my subconscious interests in the construction site and this visual manifesto is the result. They are now conscious interests.

This visual manifesto responds to Prospection 02, yet the ideas here have been developed over longer engagement with construction sites. It is specific to construction sites as things-in-themselves and attempts to reveal their nature as a site type. Past, futures and other presents play their part in the wider context of construction sites, but this piece tries to define the 'knowns' of the site before working outwards. Although a visual manifesto, it is not merely illustrative. The aim is to begin with visual cues, representing the most common practical engagement with the construction site. Although 'of the moment' it also aims to be temporally aware, viewing construction sites in terms of the motion between past and future that partially defines their wider role.

Lastly, this visual manifesto is not the whole story and does not aim to obscure, replace or ignore other primary engagements with construction sites such as bodily experience, smell, sound, human experience etc.

NOWS AND NOT YETS



Construction sites are divided into phases, phases into lots, lots into jobs, jobs into tasks. The result is that throughout the construction site we can observe the juxtaposition of different stages of completeness, while the ultimate 'finished' project remains in a state of not yet.

Roads and routeways are often first as they are needed for the movement of people and vehicles and services are generally physically beneath the rest of the development. Soft landscaping is often last as it needs construction people to get themselves and their things out of the way. Perhaps it also needs to look its best on the day people move in and is therefore completed as late as possible.

Some juxtapositions are more obvious than others. Buildings, roads, kerbstones are easy to see happening. Services are buried, but there.

SEEPAGE



In seepage we see the breakdown of intent. Over time, always nearing the end of the construction project, we can observe the permeation of physical and conceptual boundaries and forms. The 'solid' boundaries can be seen in the past as relicts of Day 1. The split sandbag, the shortcut footpath, the unrepaired sign, all representative of not just ongoing time within the construction site, but its relationship to the nearing end of construction and the lack of desire, need, money or ability to keep up the Day 1 standard.

ERRATICS



Construction sites are controlled environments so in them we can easily observe those things that are not supposed to be there. Sometimes these erratic are known, but tolerated, sometimes not noticed, at other times completely unknown.

Rubbish is easy to spot, and may be expected, but is not part of what the construction site tries to be, in fact rubbish on the ground is actively anti-control. At the other end of the scale we see cress growing hydroponically in reservoirs of water on top of crash barriers, an unknown thing in an unknown environment, yet created by the presence of construction.

The presence of things unknown or not supposed to be there

PALETTE



Colour does funny things on construction sites.

We can see the muting of colour as dust and other side-products of construction spread and begin to cover things.

We can witness the intensity of hi-vis.

The construction site offers an opportunity for us to explore not just 'colour' but other parameters that make colour what it is; hue, colourfulness, chroma, saturation, lightness and brightness.

We can also think towards notions of colour texture and luminosity and how the construction site creates and sustains them.

BARRIERS



Construction sites are full of hoardings and fences. This forces us into remote viewing of much of the site. Sometimes we our view is relatively unrestricted, but still criss-crossed with bars. At other times we are made to view things from the 'safe' distance or to only see the upper portion of a view because of a wooden hoarding.

As well as conditioning our views and viewing positions, barriers divide the construction site, firstly into inside and outside, then again into different contractor lots, safe and unsafe spaces, roads and not-roads.

ACCESS



Movement around the site is highly controlled for many reasons. The visibility of access – restrictions, controls and recommendations – is a key part, as intended, of our experience of the construction site.

Arrows, turnstiles and demarcated routeways control our movements, but before they do so are visual cues to the presence of control, of behavioural, legislative or best practice norms, or of the multiplicity of readers of signage all needing different types and levels of direction or just direction to different places.

STILL LIFE



All over the construction site we see piles of things about to be used. Sometimes they are piles of one thing, sometimes they are groups of different things about to come together as something else, like a group of white goods about to be a kitchen.

We can think of these temporary still life assemblages as hovering on the cusp of the future.

They are still, but defined by the temporal proximity of their use. In the construction still life we see a motion-free action aesthetic defined by potentiality.

CONSTRUCTION PASTORAL



The contemporary construction site is replete with mini-landscapes, small pieces of nature, gardens, pastoral episodes.

They can arise from the partial completion of final product landscaping, or because of the temporary needs of the construction such as the digging of ponds. They can also be carry-overs from the pre-construction landscape such as trees or water courses.

What ties them together is the prominence of 'nature happening' within their indistinct boundaries: in the temporary pond, ducks search for food; bulrushes grow next to the 15 mph sign.

BIT OF PREVIOUS



At many points in and through construction we are presented with what was there before. Holes in the ground, islands of preservation, architectural references or development names all provide snatches, glimpses of what was before. Sometimes we see literal slices of past and present thrust into the contemporary site.

In some ways, the past is passive in these acts of revelation, just 'being there'. But in some of these glimpses we can discern other things, the duration, endurance, sometimes resistance that reveals the presence of a more active past and its agents.