

# 12 EPHEMERAL LANDSCAPES AT THE RURAL-URBAN FRINGE

MATTIAS QVISTRÖM

KATARINA SALTZMAN

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## INTRODUCTION

In the vicinity of cities, areas of considerable size are at some stage of rural-urban transformation. In many cases these areas will remain in a phase in-between countryside and urban use for decades. The dreams of urban expansion are usually far-reaching, and development plans are frequently postponed. Therefore, the landscapes of the rural-urban fringe often remain in an indefinite state of limbo for years, waiting for plans to be fulfilled, decisions to be made, and ideas to be realized. In order to interpret the general complexity and dynamics of these landscapes it is essential to find adequate methods and analytical perspectives. This paper will give a concise introduction to an interdisciplinary research project that is highlighting the specific character of ephemeral landscapes at the rural-urban fringe. Previous landscape research on the rural-urban fringe will be presented, followed by an introduction to the theoretical framework for the landscape studies within this project. The paper is illustrated with photographs that are all part of the documentation of one of our case study areas: Tullstorp, at the rural-urban fringe of Malmö in southernmost Sweden.

Landscapes at the rural-urban fringe are a frequently overlooked asset within spatial planning, for example regarding wildlife and recreation, but also for the character and green structure of the city of tomorrow. The interpretation of areas along the rural-urban fringe is often characterized by the awareness that these landscapes are sooner or later to be transformed. During the process of rural-urban transformation previous landscape values are often replaced by new ones, some of which are clearly connected to the temporary character inherent to landscapes awaiting exploitation (Countryside agency & Groundwork, 2004; Qviström & Saltzman, 2006).

The term “ephemeral landscape” captures the transient character of such a landscape. “Ephemeral” means short-lived, transient, passing, fleeting, brief, momentary or temporary. According to Paul Brassley (1998), contemporary landscape research has a focus on permanent features, such as buildings, roads, canals, forests and field boundaries, while the momentary aspects of the landscapes are very seldom studied. Brassley argues for research on ephemeral aspects of the common landscape, trivial processes such as changes in the weather, the passing of seasons, gradual changes in the vegetation, etcetera, which are, in his opinion disregarded within landscape research, although they play an important role in the experience of a landscape. While Brassley is

primarily interested in the aesthetic aspects of rural landscapes, we find the concept ephemeral particularly useful to understand the complex social and biological processes that structure the transient landscapes at the rural-urban fringe.

Recent research concerning the dynamics of landscapes has noted deficiencies in the way landscape dynamics are treated within spatial planning, due to insufficient knowledge and understanding of how landscapes are established, interpreted, maintained and developed. Within spatial planning, the process of transforming rural areas into urban land is usually presented as a simple transformation in two stages: the former countryside and the future urban land-use. Neither the gradual alterations at the urban fringe, nor the qualities of the temporary landscapes that develop during the process of transformation are being considered (Qviström, 2005c).



**Figure 1:** A deserted greenhouse on the outskirts of Malmö. Gardening industries are often located at the rural-urban fringe, and can be regarded as part of the transition from rural to urban land-use (cf. Hart, 1991). Greenhouses are relatively fragile constructions, not built with the intention to last forever. Compared to many other built environments, greenhouse complexes may be regarded as ephemeral buildings (photo: Mattias Qviström).

Our interdisciplinary research project “Ephemeral landscapes: exploring landscape dynamics at the urban fringe<sup>1</sup>” seeks to explore the landscapes that occur in the time-space gaps in-between the rural and the urban. What are the characteristic features of

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such landscapes, what kinds of values and meanings are established “in the meantime”, during the process of transformation, or while awaiting a planned urban conversion? How are these ephemeral landscapes used and appreciated, and by whom? The research project consists of two equivalent parts; one studying how the landscape is perceived, used, valued and affected by different human actors, and the other studying the development of the urban fringe during the last three decades and the ways in which the dynamics of this urban fringe have been treated within spatial planning. In this project, the perspectives and methods of ethnology and landscape planning are combined, assuming that this collaboration will generate new perspectives and knowledge on vernacular landscapes, beneficial not least for spatial planning. Despite different scholarly approaches, the researchers involved are connected by a common interest in historical perspectives on contemporary landscapes, and a wish to emphasise and further develop the time aspect in landscape studies (Saltzman 2001; Qviström 2003). The project began in 2004 and is due to be completed in 2008. The case studies will primarily focus on the inner urban fringe of the second and third largest city in Sweden – Gothenburg and Malmö. Based on the empirical and theoretical results of the first two years, further analyses of ephemeral landscapes, including international comparisons, will be completed.

### **LANDSCAPE RESEARCH ON THE URBAN FRINGE**

The transitory landscapes characteristic of the rural-urban fringe cover substantial areas on the outskirts of large cities all around the world. Even though these areas can be regarded as one of the representative landscapes of contemporary society, they are often overlooked. Their character is often perceived as provisional and ambiguous, as they do not fit into established categories such as urban and rural, nature and culture (Qviström & Saltzman, 2006). However, the indefinite character of the interspaces at the fringe also makes new socio-spatial relations possible. These ephemeral landscapes are, from a cultural point of view, not merely “empty”; they are also “open” to be found and defined (Löfgren, 1997).

Recent research concerning the urban fringe is reviewed and discussed in a paper by Qviström (2005c). That paper argues that current research primarily focuses on a regional level, and that local studies rarely pay interest to areas which are about to be used for urban expansion in the nearest future. Rather, local studies are performed at the outer part of the urban fringe. However, Olshammar (2002) has studied the “permanent-provisional state” that frequently occurs at the rural-urban fringe. Furthermore, the research project “Threatened landscapes”, studying the urban fringe of Stavanger and Oslo, focuses on spatial planning at the edge of the city (Swensen, 2002, 2004). Applied research has recently been conducted by the peri-urban research project team at etcetera, (e.g., Dàvila *et al.*, 1999) and at the Countryside agency and Groundwork in the UK (Countryside agency & Groundwork, 2004). The latter project describes possibilities using the urban fringe for recreation in a sustainable society. Falck (2002) and Murdoch

& Lowe (2003) provide interesting historical studies and theoretical discussions, related to the theories presented below.

Contemporary research on urban sprawl, exurbia, peri-urban development, “shrinking cities” as well as historical studies on fringe-zones is abundant and offers a broader context to discuss the rural-urban fringe. However, from the standpoint of landscape research, the characteristics of the landscape at the fringe can only to a limited extent be understood using generalising international comparisons, since the character of the rural-urban fringe is dependent on national legislation within planning, local land-use and topography, urban history, cultural conditions, etc. Since international research on the urban fringe is heavily based on North American studies, the Cost Action C10 on the outskirts of European cities (Borsdorf & Zembri, 2004) and European studies within “Shrinking cities” are important to bring forward a European perspective on fringe areas (see also Bergström, 2003).

Nevertheless there are still many white spots to be explored in relation to the landscapes at the rural-urban fringe. For instance, there is a need for additional Nordic studies, relating international research to Nordic settings and landscapes. There is also a need for comparative studies within the Nordic countries, analysing the different impacts of related (yet different) planning legislations. Even though there are a number of ongoing research projects and publications of interest within this field, case studies with the perspective of landscape research are very rare, and analyses regarding the relation between spatial planning and everyday places or studies on ephemeral landscapes at the fringe are still the exceptional cases.



**Figure 2:** The construction of the Outer Ring-road at the city edge of Malmö in 1999. The road was originally planned in the 1940s and has affected land-use ever since (Qviström, 2005a) (photo: Mattias Qviström).

## LANDSCAPE RESEARCH AND SITUATED KNOWLEDGE

Landscapes capture different and competing interpretations and interests, and every activity and representation will either question or confirm the dominating ways of seeing and ways of acting within the landscape. Such constant re-negotiations are not merely local, they are located, situated, they have a place and a time. Therefore, an everyday perspective, focusing on the vernacular activities and day-to-day changes, is fundamental for an understanding of landscape transformations. A focus on the ephemerality of landscapes is one way to bring forward an understanding of the transitory character of everyday places (Qviström & Saltzman, 2006). The obviously complex and transitory character of the rural-urban fringe makes it an interesting matter for the analysis of the dynamics of landscapes, and a suitable point of departure for discussing processes of transformation in human-environmental relations (Saltzman, 2006).

An important aim of this project is to identify the users of the landscapes at the urban fringe, and to analyse their experience and use, and thereby how they maintain and/or transform the landscapes. In order to grasp the dynamics of landscapes, a profound knowledge and understanding of the many ways in which landscapes are utilized and experienced by people is essential. By focusing on people's everyday activities and experiences, as well as on discursive practices and the dimension of power in social interactions, an understanding of the multiple, co-operating and conflicting uses and perceptions of landscapes can be achieved (cf. Saltzman, 2001).

Spatial planning is one of the most important societal practices affecting everyday life at the urban fringe. This practise, however, is based on a modern way of understanding space and place. Theories on modernity and utopian planning are in this project used to analyse the ways in which the urban fringe is treated and understood within spatial planning (Latour, 1993; Söderberg, 1996; Olwig, 2002; Qviström, 2003). Case studies based on situated knowledge will also bring forward concepts and categories suitable for characterizing these landscapes. This topian (*i.e.*, place-based) approach is part of a long tradition within humanistic landscape research, questioning modern dichotomies and striving for other ways of thinking (Qviström, 2003). Modernity, as Latour illustrates, is based on clear dividing lines between e.g., nature – culture, and city – country. The urban fringe is something in between, and it is therefore treated as wasteland as its character and qualities are very difficult to grasp and analyze using modern dichotomies as urban – rural (Qviström, 2005b, 2005c). Deficiencies of spatial planning based on modern thinking are thereby highlighted when focusing on landscapes that are no longer rural but not yet urban (cf. Murdoch & Lowe, 2003).



**Figure 3:** Parts of landscape at the urban fringe in Tullstorp still have the visual appearance of countryside, but the area has for decades been included in the plans for the future growth of the city of Malmö (photo: Katarina Saltzman).

### **OUTCOME OF THE PROJECT**

In this project, the inner urban fringes of Malmö and Gothenburg have been examined in several case studies. Gathering a variety of information in the field through frequent visits, walks, participatory observation and interviews, demands relatively small case study areas and emphasises the current and recent history of the area. This research has proven ephemeral landscapes to be almost invisible in archives and statistics (Qviström & Saltzman, 2006). Field studies, although time consuming, have so far proved to be the most fruitful methodological approach. Comparisons between results of field studies with planning documents and regulations have been a rewarding part of the analysis. This is particularly important as it is obvious that long term landscapes studies at the inner fringe, illustrating the entire transformation from rural to urban land-use, are very rare.

Photographing is an important part of the documentation within the case studies (cf. Zintchenko, 2005). The photographs illustrating this paper show a few examples of places and features within one of our case study areas; Tullstorp, located at the north-eastern fringe of Malmö. The area today known as Tullstorp has been cut off for a few years from the original village with the same name by the Outer ring-road that surrounds Malmö. Today's Tullstorp can be characterized as a miscellaneous mixture of buildings, activities and lifestyles, old and new, urban and rural. Gardening industry has

been and is still a significant feature in the area. Tullstorp is planned to be turned into two new residential areas.



**Figure 4:** Horses are a quite typical feature in contemporary urban fringe landscapes, functionally linked as much to urban as to rural networks, and yet continuously contested by the expanding city (photo: Katarina Saltzman).

In this paper our aim was to introduce the research questions and theoretical framework of the research project “Ephemeral landscapes: exploring landscape dynamics at the urban fringe”. The results of the research carried out within this project for the first years have been presented elsewhere (Qviström, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Qviström & Saltzman, 2006; Saltzman, 2005; Saltzman, 2006a; Saltzman, 2006b; Zintchenko, 2005). In 2006 the project involves six qualified researchers, and further results are to be presented. Altogether, this project can be expected to elucidate many important aspects of ephemeral landscapes at the urban fringe. We hope that it can also inspire other researchers to carry out comparative studies elsewhere in Europe.

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