Project Loops, "Edgelands" and the Permanent Reimagining of Landscape

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Abstract

This article proposes that Boris Groys' claim that contemporary life is mediated via an ongoing loop of speculative, unfinished "projects" can be used to explore the production of particular kinds of interfaciality and "Edgelands", as defined by Marion Shoard. I examine the Granton Waterfront area, a region of Edinburgh, Scotland, that has witnessed redevelopment projects initiated and abandoned over the last three decades, and where construction materials, half-finished roads, derelict gates and re-zoned "development" areas are constantly revalued and reinhabited by humans and non-humans in looped cycles. Utilizing photographic images produced at various points over a decade to construct a visual narrative of the site, as well as drawing on the work of cultural geographer Hamish Kallin, I demonstrate how Shoard's and Groys' concepts, most often applied in art, cultural geography and planning contexts, can be useful tools for contemporary archaeologists in examining and reflecting upon the production and ongoing lives of 'waste' landscapes.

Keywords: Edgelands, looping, projects, waste landscapes

Introduction

In the environmental writer Marion Shoard's seminal essay "Edgelands of Promise" (Shoard 2002), she describes the characteristics and various significances of particular kinds of interfacial, "disordered" and sometimes accidentally formed zones that sit between urban and

rural landscapes, most often situated at the rims of cities and towns. These are liminal spaces that exist, although not necessarily always planned as such, to facilitate activities of settlement and urbanization considered too taboo, unsightly, unsanitary, messy or even boring to take place in or near attractive city centers, market zones and residential areas. These areas are often regarded as abject places, to be ignored *until necessary* – that is, until when we might need to travel there to perform activities often explicitly associated with waste, including legal or illegal refuse dumping, recycling or occasionally disposing of old cars in scrapyards .

Shoard's aims in defining Edgelands were to propose focused study on, leisurely engagement with and artistic exploration of these particular kinds of landscapes, using these approaches as prompts to think through how Edgelands might be valued and conceptualized as generative and useful rather than derided for their presence and functions, including their use by non-humans. In a similar vein to Rathje's seminal work on the archaeology of garbage (Rathje 1974), Shoard notes that they are spaces with the potential to give us insight into how our cultures operate, and therefore should be routinely examined by planners and landscape architects, as well as by scholars of landscape, material culture and the public more generally. Up until the point when she was writing, she argued, they had tended largely to be overlooked as subjects of any serious, in-depth inquiry or useful integration within planning practices.

In this article, I use photographs taken by me over a ten-year period to explore visually a "stalled development" in north Edinburgh, Scotland. This area is a particular kind of landscape that I argue can be classified as an Edgeland, but which departs from Shoard's original definition. This kind of site doesn't necessarily sit at the edge of cities or towns, and may not be related to long-term processes that characterize the mundane practices of urbanization. Rather, this and landscapes like it tend to have been subject to numerous rapid phases of development,

and subsequent, equally rapid, abandonment, a phenomenon particularly prevalent following the 2008 financial crisis. They are "Edgelands" in the context of their evolving, cyclical "brown", "drosscape" (Berger 2007) and "greyfield" statuses, their patchworked, anti-aesthetic qualities and their material treatment during 'dormant' phases as liminal, informally used and overlooked "wastelands".

I also utilize Boris Groys' (2010) claim that twenty-first century life is largely shaped by ceaseless cycles of project formulation and abandonment, thus following Penrose (2017) in urging archaeologists of the contemporary past to consider how the complexities and dynamism of speculative economics and their associated development practices continually re-shape the landscapes and materiality that we have tended to categorize over the last two decades monolithically as postindustrial "modern" or "contemporary" ruins. Analyses of these sites, she has argued, tend to foreground and emphasize twentieth-century deindustrialization more readily than looking in more detail at the speed and pace at which neoliberal economies of the twenty-first century *produce* these material forms through processes of creative destruction. The dynamic implications inherent in how these particular types of Edgelands are produced, consistent with Groys' conception of the apparent acceptance of neoliberal, cyclical project-based culture and subsequent discard, may provide a useful counter to this, perhaps allowing us to understand such sites more holistically and as *processual*.

Edgelands: Expanded Views

A typical Edgeland, according to Shoard's original conception in 2002, is a patchwork of landscapes that together may include, but certainly are not limited to, industrial estates, warehouses, landfills, scrapyards, unkempt farmland and "undeveloped", scruffy properties

adjacent to, or whose boundaries seem to brush up against or even overlap with, any number of these facilities. Since it was coined, the term has become more expansively used to describe liminal areas that exist in and around numerous kinds of landscape features, rather than just city or town and "country" boundaries. These might include, for example, unkempt shorelines of waterways and water bodies, as well as various types of brownfield sites within the boundaries of urban areas. Cultural geographers have been particularly interested in emphasizing how their "chaotic" aesthetics and use patterns; as noted by Humphris and Rauws (2020: 590), the term "Edgeland" is "frequently deployed to describe waste landscapes absent of institutional programme and lacking in regulatory mechanisms". This lack of formal regulation in practice is despite the fact that these areas are technically, of course, subject to the same laws, rules and conventions of most any other landscape.

Edgelands have also gained traction over the past two decades as cultural forms to be represented, interrogated and subjected to experimentation in various creative practices, including visual art, film, poetry, literature and architectural criticism (Dave 2011; Farley and Roberts 2011; Robinson 2017). The vaguely understood, liminal netherworlds surrounding towns or cityscapes exist in aesthetic opposition to landscapes that, especially in English contexts (Shoard 2002), are historically associated with particular values and traditions: the countryside as genteel and bucolic; cities as places of towering buildings; towns as homes to vernacular architecture. Edgelands of course lack the restrictions that govern such spaces. Solà-Morales's (1995) examination of the French concept of *terrains vague* within photographic practices and its relationship to image making and ways of seeing and producing liminal, unclassified parts of the city, is similar in orientation and definition to Shoard's conception of Edgelands as places filled with potential, and certain notions of maneuverability and freedom:

The relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential of the city's *terrain vagues*. Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation.[…]

[T]he paradox of the message we receive from these indefinite and uncertain spaces is not purely negative. While [analagous terms] are generally preceded by negative particles (in-determinate, im-precise, un-certain), this absence of limit precisely contains the expectation of mobility, vagrant roving, free time, liberty. (Solà-Morales 1995, 26)

Edgelands have long been especially appealing to practitioners interested in and drawn to the processes and aesthetics of ruination, decay, hauntology and eeriness (Keiller 2014; Luckhurst 2020), and artistic explorations during the twenty-first century has been adjacent to "ruins studies" within the humanities and social sciences (seminal works include DeSilvey 2006; DeSilvey and Edensor 2012; Dillon 2011; Edensor 2005a, 2005b; Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014; Pétursdóttir 2014).

I want to draw particular attention in this special forum to the specific value that the examination of Edgelands has had for geographers, planners and urban studies scholars – including Shoard herself – who are interested in practices surrounding and attitudes to waste. Studies within these fields have examined, for example, how Edgelands are used informally, how they are classified in planning processes overtly as wase and how such sites are produced through economic and political processes. I suggest that archaeologists might borrow from this rich body of work and its theoretical and conceptual toolkits to analyze and reflect upon the

production of waste landscapes as part of their regular engagement with them.

Edgelands as "Wastelands"

Studying Edgelands in the twenty-first century has provided cultural geographers and scholars in urban studies with insight into the attitudes of planners and the populations they serve toward patterns of discard and waste. Qviström (2008), for example, has argued that the "metaphorical" category of Edgelands as *particular types* of "wasteland" allows them to be dismissed in planning processes as *anticipatory*: "on hold", and therefore rarely taken into account in planning processes. Their dereliction thus continues in the present and into the future precisely because there is an assumption that "they will be transformed [by landowners and/or developers] in the near future" (Qviström 2008).

Conversely, Humphris and Rauws' (2020) work on stalled sites in Glasgow and Berger's (2007) work on "drosscapes" in the urban United States both emphasize analysis of the *materiality* of such sites as particular forms of Edgeland that facilitate appropriation and reuse by citizens in the wake of long periods of "discard" and assumed "*vacancy*" by developers and landowners. Following the physical interventions of what they term "spatial appropriation practitioners" ("SAPs"), they describe finding

> a wide variety of individuals approaching Edgelands sites among which some find a greater degree of comfort in stepping outside of legal frameworks and making physical alterations to untouched territory. In doing so, they "pioneer" the appropriation of a site with actions such as removing barricades or being the first to inscribe graffiti on a wall, initiating the transformation of the site into a liminal space that is neither off limits nor

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part of the public realm. This, in turn, opens new opportunities for other curious [spatial appropriation practitioners] less intent on explicit violation but keen to find a quiet spot or shortcut. In the long-term absence of planning activity in the Edgelands, SAPs may be read as "emergent ecologies" […] whereby one activity may create the conditions for a succession of others to flourish. Evidently, stalled development processes offer significant opportunities for SAPs to emerge, sustain and evolve. (Humphris and Rauws' (2020, 598)

Interestingly, then, the assumptions of planners ignoring and citizens informally using Edgelands, although inverse to one another, both result in the ongoing dereliction of these landscapes.

Alongside these insights, there is also an anthropological and archaeological sensibility in Shoard's original conception of Edgelands, in particular the way in which she discusses them as material forms which, if analyzed in a sustained way, can reveal much about people's everyday beliefs and mundane practices, particularly attitudes toward waste. Paralleling Rathje's (1974) seminal work on "garbology", and in an almost ethnographic passage from her 2002 essay, she remarks that

[t]own and country may show us the surface of life with which we feel comfortable, but the interface shows us its broiling depths. If people were encouraged to understand this world more, they might feel less alienated and puzzled by the circumstances of their lives. Many of the activities we have dumped in the interface may be there because we do not esteem them, but perhaps we should esteem them more. We might all be better off if we both understood

better and respected more the apparently mundane yet vital activities which make our society work. (Shoard 2002, 89)

Exploring these sites, whether through their visual and material properties or observing how people interact with them (or both), implies examining not only their present existence and use, but *how that use* contributes to their very formation and reformation through time. The next section explores the way in which the world under neoliberal capitalism is dictated by ever-looping project formulation and discard, which, I suggest, is how many Edgelands, particularly stalled development sites, come to exist.

'Project' Formulation: A Way to Understand Twenty-First Century Creative Destruction?
In 2010, the philosopher Boris Groys published *Going Public*, the first in a series of brief "readers" commissioned by *e-Flux Journal* that critically examine the sociocultural and economic conditions of contemporary cultural production. The brief but expansive edition contains polymathic meditations on the subject of "project formulation", specifically within the arts but also applying more broadly to other realms of cultural production, including, for example, architecture and design. The overarching aim of the volume is to examine the troubled partnership between the public and private spheres that we rely on to produce and regulate our cultural and material lives in Euroamerican contexts, and how those models enroll ceaseless, speculative practices in looping cycles which result in projects – whether art, architecture, or planning – continually being abandoned and discarded if they don't immediately seem to conform precisely to present values.

In the chapter entitled "The Loneliness of the Project" Groys remarks that

[t]hese days, whatever endeavor one sets out to pursue in the economic, political or cultural field, one first has to formulate a fitting project in order to apply for official approval or funding of the project from one or several public authorities. Should this project in its original form be rejected, it is then modified in an attempt to improve its chances of being accepted. […] In this manner, all members of our society are constantly preoccupied with devising, discussing and dismissing an endless series of projects. […] Most of these projects remain forever unrealized. All it requires is one or another assessor to report that a project lacks promise, is difficult to finance, or is simply undesirable, and the entire labor invested in the project's formulation has been a waste of time. (Groys 2010, 71–72)

This conception of "the project", Groys argues, has skewed our sense of temporality to accommodate ever-looping cycles of production, which can be directly observed in landscapes where building projects have been abandoned as a result of speculative economics.

Modern Ruins, Stalled Sites, Photographic Observation and Creative Destruction

In the years following the financial crisis of 2008, abandoned and "unrealized" development sites, or "stalled spaces", "modern ruins" and "ghost estates", as they have been referred to in planning literature, news media and political geography research (Boyle *et al.* 2014; Arboleda 2016, 2020), became a subject of much scrutiny, debate and public attention . As noted by Olsen and Pétursdóttir (2014) and Pohl (2021), images of "crisis-scapes" and "modern ruins" like construction projects and housing estates that had been abandoned mid-construction proliferated

in news media across Euroamerican contexts. Along with other "disaster" sites across the world, these material forms became increasingly symbolic visual and material evidence of credit- and debt-selling economies in peril. From the late 1990s to mid-2000s, in places like "Celtic Tiger" Ireland, so named because of its Asian-style booming economy, encountering partially built swathes of housing developments would have been considered evidence of the economy's health. However, as O'Callaghan *et al.* (2014) remark:

> With the collapse of the property market, these empty housing estates – which, in the intervening years, had grown in number – could no longer be rationalized as "normal" functional components of the landscape. They returned as a problematic synecdoche whose increasingly visible presence was simultaneously revealed by, and evidence of, the crisis.

A number of publications during the 2010s to the present within geography and planning have dealt with the socio-economic entanglements of these sites. In particular, O'Callaghan's longstanding exploration of Ireland's ghost estates is concerned with the structural elements that led to the Irish housing collapse, and the political conditions that underpinned their lengthy presence in the country's landscape (O'Callaghan 2015).

As Penrose (2017) has recently outlined, these kinds of analyses, which foreground the sociopolitical and economic structures that drive speculative development practices, , have been absent from a good deal of contemporary archaeological analyses dealing with "modern" and/or "contemporary" ruination. She argues that there is a danger for archaeologists, particularly those who focus on the recent past, in focusing primarily on the material elements of post-industrial

capitalist withdrawal and largely ignoring the ensuing speculative practices that have been responsible for the formation of many of what we might consider to be "contemporary ruins":

> While the "thingness" of ruins […], their inherent value, their own-ness, does indeed provide a fruitful avenue for material observation and the understanding of certain human conceptions and non-human growth cycles, it wilfully sidesteps both broad issues of economic change and detailed understandings of the complexity of place. In some ways this is comparable to the keen focus of industrial archaeology on specific technologies and the privileging of the machine: a neat paring of industrial and post-industrial archaeology in which things and places become isolated from all but the most obvious or immediate networks and systems, and a real critique of capitalism is missed, again. Neoliberalism's techniques are not limited to the ruin of heavy industry and the human cost that that entails. It is built on speculation and accumulation, the work of which is done from, and exhibited in a new landscape of commerce. If we look carefully, we can see neoliberalism's own uncertainty in these landscapes. An archaeological eye can track the gambles, pay-offs, big wins, and bigger losses in these forms. The deindustrialized is the post-industrial: the uncertain present grasping at a fleeting past to ensure a fantasy future. Sometimes, ruins can obscure the broader view. (Penrose 2017, 187)

This critique is essential for those engaged in the study of contemporary ruins. The particular focus on trust in the "potential" of speculation to ensure the creation of a "fantasy future" can be seen clearly in the Edgelands of stalled developments and "failed" sites of regeneration. I propose here, following Olsen and Pétursdóttir (2014), that critically employing

imaging making as tool and method for examining and attending to sites of ruination – contrary to longstanding blanket claims of "othering" disaster landscapes (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014) – has the potential to attend to materiality and capture its entanglements in ways that embody and engage sensitively with the processes that produce them. As emphasized by González-Ruibal (2020) and in the work of Lekakis (2019), photographs of this kind of material remain have the ability to evoke the changing and evolving nature of things, rendering them "topological and accumulating rather than successive and terminal" (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014b: 18)

The next section uses photographs of the Granton Waterfront area in Edinburgh that I produced over the course of a decade while exploring the area on foot, and draws on the work of the cultural geographer Hamish Kallin. Kaliin has written about the seeming permanence of regeneration in this particular region of north Edinburgh, where the value of the waterfront has continually risen and fallen over the last two decades; this cycle is reflected in the derelict materiality that has characterized the site since the 2008 financial crisis up to 2021, with the renewal of construction under different project formulations. Although Kallin's work focuses largely on analyses of the policies and the socioeconomic structures that have underpinned the formation of the area as a kind of Edgeland, my own observations of its materiality, and the way this is entangled with those structures, may, following Penrose, be instructive to archaeologists engaged in studying contemporary processes of ruination.

Granton, Edinburgh: Regeneration Project Loops

Granton Harbour was once a bustling port facilitating trade networks, site of the oldest car factory in the UK and home to a quarry and a gasworks that supported power generation for the residents of Edinburgh. During the 1960s and 1970s, it suffered from severe industrial and

economic decline, but since 2000 it has been celebrated as a significant site of "regeneration" for the city and in the early to mid-2000s was targeted intensely for redevelopment. However, the first phase of this, undertaken by Waterfront Edinburgh Limited, left much of the former dockland's landscape in a state of dereliction (Kallin, 2021; Gray and Kallin 2022), and over time, subsequent projects have left increasing amounts of waste in their wake subsequent to their abandonment – particularly construction detritus, including concrete blocks, temporary, often mangled security fencing (see Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4) and several paved roads to nowhere, sometimes blocked by large boulders and rusting metal barriers for years at a time (Figures 1 and 3). This debris punctuates the spaces between what were from 2008 to roughly 2019 partially occupied blocks of flats that had been touted as luxury apartments for young professionals in the Waterfront Edinburgh project "masterplan" (see Figure 7). Eventually, the area seemingly also became an informal zone in which to dump discarded household objects and other kinds of waste (Figures 5, 6 and 7).

<Insert Figures 1 to 8>

Intrigued by this landscape and the processes leading to the affective qualities of abandonment embodied within the photos above, Hamish Kallin has undertaken in-depth research on the policies and plans that have driven the regeneration projects along the Granton waterfront, as well on on the region's twentieth-century history and deindustrialization and the frequent rise and fall of the value of its landscapes. He and Neil Gray have written on what they refer to as the frequent de- and re-valorization of the waterfront:

By the late 1990s, Granton contained over half of the city's vacant land. Waterfront Edinburgh Limited… [called] Granton a "cut-off, polluted, contaminated and forgotten part of Edinburgh" in one sentence before promising a "world-class destination" in the next. […] Unrealized plans include: multiple luxury hotels, a World Trade Centre and even an artificial island with a beach. The original 'masterplan' was interrupted to such a degree that the project either side of the 2007 to 2008 crisis looks markedly different (Gray and Kallin 2011).

More recently, Kallin as further noted:

The declared fate of this site has fluctuated from 'surplus' land to imagined opulence; back again to 'surplus' land and on to reimagined opulence. It is a story that plays out over multiple decades, with wildly varying calculations of what is possible, realistic, desirable and obtainable against the backdrop of an economic 'reality' that has both fed these visions and rendered them harshly irrelevant. (Kallin 2021, 615).

Kallin's recent work on the Granton region has made use of the geographer Neil Smith's "rent gap" model of gentrification (Smith 1979) to analyze the seemingly endless looping regeneration project cycles along the area's waterfront. The model, as Kallin explains, involves a cycle of calculating the *current* value of a site and its "rent" or income as it ages or falls into dereliction, and the speculative practice of then calculating the *potential* profit if re-vitalized, thus establishing a "gap" between the two in order to propose future regeneration projects. In the case of Granton, the "potential" of the of the site has yet to be realized, as the above images of it

over time show, and as is also clear from the materiality of the waste spread throughout, intermixed with the soil, and the weathered barriers. Somehow, though, this doesn't seem to diminish developers' belief that future projects will regenerate the area, thus re-valorizing it, to use Kallin's term, and beginning the cycle over again. Like Qviström's analysis of Edgelands as *anticipatory* and therefore existing in a permanent state of protracted stasis, and Groys's claim that contemporary life is dictated by project formulation, abandonment and re-formulation, the application of the rent-gap model by Kallin at Granton demonstrates how the creative destruction of speculation has shaped and reshaped the Granton waterfront over the last two decades – a particular form of neoliberal ruination.

The images presented here. capture my observations over the period described by Kallin, between the 2008 financial crisis, which saw the downfall of the first Granton Waterfront regeneration project, and the next project proposal in the late 2010s, which gave way to another cycle of project abandonment and new proposals. As outlined by Olsen and Pétursdóttir, I have attempted in the images to evoke, through examining the area over time, the successive, accumulative entanglements that each new project proposal (Groys 2010) has brought to the materiality of the Granton landscape.

Conclusion: Looped Imaginaries and the Production of Edgelands

In this article, I have proposed that Edgelands are a useful conceptual tool for archaeologies of the contemporary past, particularly for the study of the formation and ongoing lives of waste landscapes. Critically, by using photographs to explore the affective qualities and typical characteristics of Edgeland sites, including their continual transformation via their cyclical status from "wastelands" to sites with development potential and back again, it becomes possible to see

the permanent reimagining and material reshaping of landscapes like Granton Harbour in north

Edinburgh. Following Groys, sites such as Granton can be conceptualized as a particular kind of

Edgeland formed by the speculative practices associated with neoliberal capital and

development, and more generally, a global culture that lives life from "project to project". This

captures the creative destruction inherent in their formation. . Archaeologists of the

contemporary past, particularly those interested in "modern" and "contemporary" processes of

ruination, as outlined by Penrose (2017), would benefit from borrowing concepts such as these

from fields including cultural geography and urban and planning studies, in which sites are

explored holistically, from their materiality to their social and economic entanglements.

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Figure captions.

FIGURE 1. Granton Harbour's Waterfront Edinburgh Limited redevelopment, which stalled in 2008, in 2012, with unfinished paved road, derelict security fences, construction debris, unkempt plant life and boulders to block vehicle entry (photograph by the author).

FIGURE 2. View of derelict security fencing in 2012, Granton waterfront (photograph by the author).

FIGURE 3. Blocked, unfinished road in 2012 (photograph by the author).

FIGURE 4. Derelict security fencing, Granton Harbour, 2014 (photograph by the author).

FIGURE 5. Discarded buggy, Granton Harbour, 2014 (photograph by the author).

FIGURE 6. Discarded children's bicycle, Granton Harbour, 2011 (photograph by the author).

FIGURE 7. Discarded construction materials at Granton Harbour in 2011 (photograph by the author).

FIGURE 8. View of a Granton waterfront area redevelopment project, a private retirement flat complex, in 2019 (photograph by the author).