

Feral Heritage: The Case of a Ruining Landscape Garden

Abstract

Retiro is a derelict landscape garden and country estate located in the town of Molde on the north-western coast of Norway. It should not be confused with the more famous namesake Parque del Retiro in Madrid. The estate with its garden and villa was built in the 1870s in a rural landscape dotted with fields, humble farmsteads, stone fences, copses, and several other summer estates. The gradual state of disrepair started as early as the interwar years while the surrounding rural environment has been replaced by an urban landscape. This text explores the complexity of a place that can be regarded as an urban interstice, a rural remainder, and a feral wilderness: How can we characterize the present-day Retiro, which is a remnant of a once rural landscape that has slowly been enveloped by a growing city? The question of how sites are categorized is relevant for how sites are researched, interpreted, and managed. The text concludes that while it is difficult to make absolute distinctions between purely rural and urban sites, it would be a mistake to ignore the differences altogether.

Keywords: dereliction; urbanity; rurality; garden; feral; heritage; wilderness

Introduction

Retiro is a ramshackle abandoned 19th century landscape garden and estate. The name may sound familiar because it is borrowed from the famous Buen Retiro Park in Madrid. The Retiro discussed in this paper, however, is located much further north in the town of Molde on the western coast of Norway. Molde is a midsized Norwegian town with about 26000 inhabitants, situated on a strip of lowland on the north side of the Fannefjorden, surrounded by a hinterland dotted with small farms, mountains, and diverse woodlands. Today, Retiro is the largest green space in Molde, but it has been neglected and left mostly to its own devices for approximately 75 years, except for the estates villa and its immediate surroundings, which only started to dilapidate after the last member of the family auctioned it off in 2005. The northern half of the property was already owned by the municipality of Molde, while the southern half, containing the Retiro villa and the other buildings was bought by a private property development company. The future fate of Retiro is currently unresolved and caught up in disputes between different owners, urban planning, and the evaluation of its heritage value.

The material landscape of Retiro is today, in a sense, a composite palimpsest of mixed pasts, like all other archaeological sites. When it was built, Retiro was located in a rural setting, but today it has become completely enveloped in an urban landscape. The developments in the

surrounding landscape foreshadow change in Retiro by zonal redevelopment and expansion of infrastructure, as well as historical restoration to make it “fit” into the urban environment. The collision between the rurality of Retiros horticultural past, its derelict wilderness, and its present urban embrace, poses some interesting question: How can we characterize the present-day Retiro, a remnant of a once rural landscape today enveloped by a growing city? How does a rural past persist in Retiro, and has it become or exposed something else through its dereliction, something more akin to a feral wilderness? In addition, what can this tell us about the relationship between the rural and urban, and how can this help us rethink the relationship? These questions lead to the matter of how we define, understand, and categorize places that can appear ambiguous in heritage management and contemporary archaeology. The accelerated global urbanization, climate change, and not least the discussions of the Anthropocene, encourage us to rethink categorisation and interaction with the environment.



*Figure 1: The vague appearance of a clearance cairn along one of the disappearing paths in the garden. Only visible because of a copse of overgrown silver firs (*Abies alba*) that has stunted the vegetation under their inumbrating branches. Photo: Author.*

A derelict garden

Before delving into the present-day landscape of Retiro, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the history of the estate, which is interesting in itself and one of the reasons why there is currently growing interest in restoring the ruining property to its former glory. The construction of the landscape garden and villa was finished in 1874. It was built as a summer retreat by the Danish consul and fish merchant Christian Johnsen, who had his permanent residence in the neighbouring town of Kristiansund. The villa and the accompanying gardener's residence were elaborate for their time, made in Swiss chalet style, which was fashionable in Norway during the second half of the 19th century. The Retiro property had a circumference of approximately 1.2 kilometres and the total area measures 8.4 hectares. This is, of course, nothing compared to the large landscape gardens elsewhere in Europe, but it is an impressive example of landscape architecture in Norway. The property was located approximately two kilometres to the west of Molde, which at the time was a small country town with only 1700 inhabitants (Det Statistiske Centralbureau 1878–1881: 9). The rural landscape was dotted with small farmsteads, cultivated land, boathouses, and other features you would expect in the coastal countryside of 19th century Norway.

Retiro was not only rural in its placement, the garden was also in some sense designed to look and feel rustic, by artistically accentuating the character of the local nature and vegetation, as well as the rural culture. A telling example is that the garden had a small hunting lodge folly built on one of the islands in an artificially made pond, which was named the 'Atlantic Ocean'. However, Retiro also incorporated many non-native plants, such as silver firs, cypresses (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*), hemp (*Cannabis sativa*), castor oil plants (*Ricinus communis*), and many other species (Lund *et al.* 1935; Vestad 1961). The imported flora, together with exotic garden ornaments, gave Retiro an eclectic appearance, where a national romantic idea of a quintessential Norwegian nature was complemented with weird alien plants, volcanic rocks from Italy, and mass produced plaster statues of classical characters such as Hercules and Triton.

Despite Retiro being a private property, the owner Johnsen kept it open to the public on Sundays (Eikrem 2015: 50). Not only the local populace took advantage of this offer. The building of the garden corresponded with some golden years of tourism in Molde, which lasted approximately from 1880 up to the Second World War (de Seve 1992). Both English and German tourists arrived in Molde by ship, and Retiro was a popular place to visit. One of the most famous tourists visiting was Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, who even offered to rent the property. Johnsen, however, turned down the offer.

For a number of reasons, such as the prohibitively expensive maintenance, the economic downturn of the 1930s, the German occupation of Norway during the Second World War, and a series of changing owners, the Retiro property, and especially the landscape garden, has fallen into disrepair over the course of the last 75 years. A local historian commented that the garden could not be characterized as anything but a ruin after visiting the property in 1953 (Parelius 1953). A decade later, a garden historian observed how some plants, despite being abandoned, continued to thrive in the now derelict landscape, giving it a continued air of ‘romance’ (Vestad 1961: 16). This still rings true today; amongst overgrown paths, birch thickets, spruce groves, empty ponds, rotten logs, and yesterday’s garbage, one can still encounter plants that have thrived in the absence of a gardener. Alien and invasive plants such as Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) and red elderberry (*Sambucus racemosa*) blossom in the present day Retiro, displaying their ambiguous contemporary identity as persistent material memories of the garden’s past and as invasive black-listed species in national biodiversity programs (cf. Gederaas *et al.* 2012; Randall 2012). A survey of the biodiversity at Retiro in 2013, noted that it contained a rich variety of old and planted trees (Gaarder and Vatne 2013). However, the surveyors’ report also recommends removing species that are defined as ‘high risk’ by the Norwegian Biodiversity Centre. Such concerns for Retiro’s floral heritage are not unfounded, considering that knotweed and yellow archangel (*Lamium galeobdolon*) have started to creep outside the old property borders.

However, Retiro is not a forgotten void in the urban landscape of the present day. Recently, archaeologists, art historians, architects, heritage officials, and the local museum have shown interest in Retiro’s historical past and its prospects for the future (cf. Rønsen 2007; Lange 2010; Kjørsvik 2012; Solli 2012; Ringstad 2014; Eikrem 2015). In particular, the condition of the villa has raised concerns, as evident by a string of articles in the local newspaper. The private company currently owning the villa has been accused of ‘speculative dilapidation’ (Solli 2012), where they gamble on leaving the building to decay beyond repair in order to make way for property development. Representatives from the county’s department of cultural heritage have since the early 2000s indicated that Retiro estate is culturally valuable and should become a protected heritage site. One of the prospects for the future is to have it included in the national lists of green spaces and historical landscapes with national value. In plans for the property drafted by the municipality (cf. Molde kommune 2014), they propose to ‘rebuild’ the historical garden, but at the same time adapt the property to its contemporary urban surroundings by

making a kindergarten out of the Swiss chalet villa, reconstructing its façade, and open up for new housing in the south-eastern part of the landscape garden.

Entering the wilderness

Retiro is today located in the middle of a typical Norwegian residential townscape, made up by single-family houses with gardens and front yard lawns. Apart from the residential areas, its closest neighbours consist of a sports centre with several soccer fields and an open park built on the natural shore to the south. Since the post-war years, the town has enveloped Retiro, rendering its originally rural landscape an enclave within the urban townscape. How has this creeping urbanisation affected the landscape of Retiro? The consequences may not appear significant, and one might even claim that the contrast produced through the enveloping town has enhanced the gardens rural ideal. However, entering its landscape with an archaeological perspective reveals several delicate and inconspicuous traces of how it has been affected by its new urban context.

For one, the urban context has contributed to an increased accumulation and variety of different things in the landscape garden. This includes everything from vacuum cleaners, plastic grave lanterns, old LCD-monitors, pots, sweaters, food packaging, stripped bike frames, grip-seal bags, syringes, umbrellas, window frames, toys, and many other stray things. Not everything seems to be random stray objects, however, including the assemblages of left-overs from campsites. These objects can be memories of events that have occurred within the garden's perimeters, but they can also be read as material traces connecting to an over-all story about the town of Molde and its marginalisation of certain people and things that are not allowed to accumulate elsewhere. As such, one may argue that the urban surroundings have resulted in new and diverse sedimentation on the surface of Retiro, a stratigraphy in progress and deposits of otherness. Whether this is a particularly 'urban' phenomenon is debatable as the same may meet the eye wherever you find yourself today, whether in extremely remote places as the bottom of the Mariana Trench or in Central Park, New York, you will find a continuously accumulating stratum of modern anthropogenic waste.

Apart from such additions, some of the original landscape has also been exploited and cared for by the new users and inhabitants, both humans and non-humans, introduced to the garden through the growth of the town. This is especially true for the serpentine gravel paths, which originally stretched over 2 km throughout the garden. Today, approximately 1 km of paths is still accessible because people and animals have continued to use them after they were abandoned by the gardener and his rake. Continued use is further seen in the way Retiro has been

inscribed with a rich repertoire of arborglyphs and graffiti, on both tree trunks and the walls of the buildings. Furthermore, workers employed by the municipality regularly remove trees that have been toppled by strong winds. Retiro is thus in some sense still cultivated and cared for, even if it is mostly left to its own devices. The most recent evidence for this is the attempted removal of Japanese knotweed colonies throughout the garden. This is also evident in the treatment of several of the campsites, which in themselves are a form of reuse. The municipality has removed some of the accumulated litter, but the most striking thing they have done is to clear away trees and bushes at these campsites – not in order to attract more campers but rather to make them less secluded and inviting for ‘unauthorized visitors’ (cf. Molde kommune 2014: 14).



Figure 2: The old grotto that was a part of the landscape garden. Today it is hidden away inside an almost impenetrable silver fir thicket. Photo: Author.

Feral heritage

Retiro has certainly not disappeared in a desert of concrete and asphalt; it has rather thrived and developed mostly on its own terms. For example, the garden plants have established its own novel ecology together with local fauna and flora. In recent years, local people have tellingly started to refer to the Retiro as ‘the Retiro Forest’ (Holsbøvåg 2010: 47). In fact, Retiro probably contains a larger number of old trees than the ‘natural’ forests in the towns’ hinterland. In its

derelict isolation from the other rural woodlands, it has been partly spared from systematic logging and forestry. There are surprising amounts of old snags found all around the garden, which are trees that are dead but still standing; these trees often serve an important ecological role in forests, serving as woodpecker nests, nourishment for fungi and insects, and as seedbeds for new plants (Franklin, Shugart and Harmon 1987). Some areas in the garden have trees and probably other organisms, such as fungi, that have lived there since long before the garden was constructed. These are in one sense vestiges of the rural landscape and ecology that was integrated in the garden's original design. Field clearance cairns from the former agricultural use of the area is another presence of the rural landscape predating Retiro's construction.

The landscape garden included several open areas in its design, such as cultivated fields and grazing meadows, which was a natural continuation of the farmland that the property was built on. In the north-western corner of the garden one of these fields are still visible, while the other fields are overgrown with trees to the extent that they are impossible to distinguish from the surrounding landscape. The remaining field has been kept free of trees, bushes, and other types of obscuring vegetation simply because it has been used as pasture for horses and to cultivate grass as fodder. Archaeologists that surveyed the area some years ago even employed a usually 'rural' survey method on the field, namely removing the top layer of anthrosol in trenches to reveal possible archaeological structures in the 'sterile' subsoil (cf. Johnston and Johnston 2012). Because of its apparent urban context, it is somewhat ironic that the section of the garden that is best taken care of has such strong rural characteristics.



Figure 3: Horses grazing in the small pasture field at Retiro. The surrounding unmanaged vegetation is constantly threatening to invade the meadow. Photo: Author.

The English landscape historian John Dixon Hunt (1997: 3–4, 2000: 32–75) has pointed out how horticulture can be regarded as a ‘third nature’. The ‘first nature’ is defined as pristine and ‘pre-human’ wilderness, while ‘second nature’ is an agricultural and rural landscape. Scholars such as Ingo Kowarik (2005) have added a ‘fourth nature’ to the equation, which consist of an ecology that has evolved within urban and industrial landscapes, where woodlands have developed independently from direct human interference, containing a large number of non-native species. In some ways Retiro can be defined as a fourth nature; its woodland contains a good amount of non-native species, and it has had the chance to develop on its own without much human interference. However, rather than having evolved within an urban or industrial landscape, it has persisted as a remnant of a rural landscape garden and a third nature in ruin. All these different notions of nature can be both confusing and constraining at the same time (cf. Desimini 2014), but they importantly point to the concept of a hybrid and mixed landscape and an ecology that meshes the human and non-human.

The post-rural landscape of Retiro may perhaps better be described as ‘feral’ rather than a site that is returning to an original and natural wilderness. As Paul Farley and Michael Roberts write in their book on what they call ‘edgelands’, wild animals and plants rely only on their instincts and DNA, while being ‘[f]eral means you have a history, a proper backstory’ (Farley and Roberts 2011: 158) – a kind of cultural load that is an indivisible part of someones being and becoming. They further state that today the ‘[f]eral is the new wild’ (Farley and Roberts 2011: 158). The ‘feral’ does not necessarily refer only to fauna or flora; it can in some sense be applied to artefacts that have escaped human care. Farley and Roberts use the discarded ‘feral car seat’ as an emblem of the edgelands (Farley and Roberts 2011: 158), which are places that lie at the edges of cities and villages.

Feral heritage such as Retiro may be described as too heterogeneous to tell the orderly history we expect at well-kept heritage sites, while also lacking the purity of the utterly wild with its presumed absence of human influence and human past. The idea of wilderness and pristine nature are naturally highly contested ideas (see Nelson and Callicott 2008), making it difficult to pinpoint what really constitutes a specific environment that is perceived by some as wild. Retiro is perhaps not at the edge or the periphery of anything; it is rather a particular place unto itself, neither reducible to simply urban nor rural, natural nor cultural. This strange and perhaps ineffable intersection of categories makes Retiro a disturbance in the eyes of city planners, private property developers, and even cultural resource management officials. It is a site that on

the one hand has a distinct history, which can be read about in books or seen in old photographs, but on the other hand it has an ambiguous and palimpsest character.

In recent decades, the challenges posed by climate change and the effect this has on the preservation of cultural heritage have rapidly become more pertinent (cf. UNESCO 2007; Harvey and Perry 2015). The consequences range from biological growth and heritage sites overgrowing with vegetation, to destruction of such sites due to extreme weather chemical, biological, and physical decomposition, and permafrost thawing (Kaslegard 2011). This in turn will influence the cultural resource management sector, where the climate change will affect the preservation and trajectory of the material past through effects such as increased erosion and faunal and floral habitat alteration. In Norway, the consequence that has perhaps been most visible is how regrowth of vegetation has covered up and colonized rural cultural landscapes (Bayr and Puschmann 2019). However, at the same time, loss of wilderness unaffected by recent human enterprises, such as infrastructure development, is seen as a major concern for biodiversity and natural heritage (Norwegian Environment Agency 2014). As such, Retiros unmanaged growth falls into a paradoxical position of being too overgrown and wild for a cultural heritage status, while at the same time not wild enough for a natural heritage status, because its legacy and vegetation are too contaminated by foreign organisms and human agency to be ‘pristine’.

This is the awkward nature of the feral heritage, where the ‘improper’ mixture of human and non-human presences of its palimpsestic character, makes for a place that heritage management and official agencies do not know how to handle in any other way than to rectify it in some sense. Despite its conspicuous nature, heritage consisting of derelict matter such as non-native plant species, genetic alteration, and depleted soils left behind by horticultural and agricultural industries, is not as ‘appreciated’ as ruins of medieval castles or rock art. The modern landscape of the countryside exhibits a wildly different rurality than the stereotypical picturesque cottages, hedges, and green pastures with grazing cattle. Contemporary archaeology is uniquely situated to face these strange mixtures of heritage, from noxious fields of Japanese Knotweed, to nitrate seepage and algae blooms, because more than any other discipline, it works with the spoils, spills, and scraps of the present past. Climate change and other environmental challenges are also a kind of ‘unruly heritage’ (cf. Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016) that we must confront, and which simultaneously muddle dichotomies such as the urban-rural and reveal the intricate interconnectedness of cultural landscapes that always have been inherently ecological.

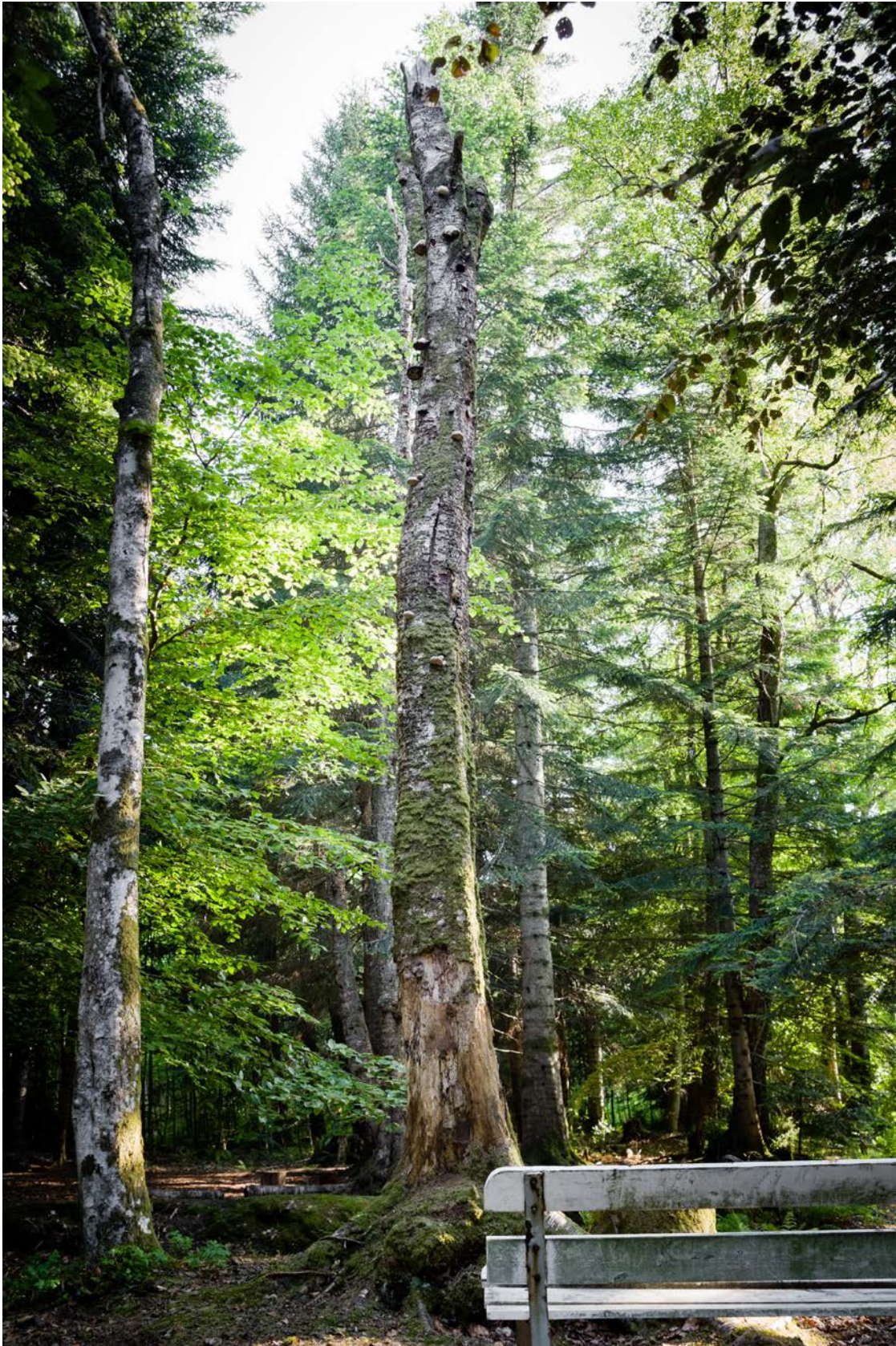


Figure 4: One of many snags in the garden standing on one of the artificial 'islands' in the Atlantic Ocean pond. This old birch snag (Betula pubescens) is an important food source for the local woodpeckers (Dendrocopos major) and birch polypores (Fomitopsis betulina). Photo: Author.

The things left behind

Despite the difficulties in dealing with categories such as rurality in a world that that by the day seems to become more uncertain, it might be wise not to dismiss them out of hand. For example, instead of employing abstract notions of rurality, it might be more fruitful to get down to earth and rather deal directly with both the human and non-human elements that are bracketed in the landscape. The idea of rurality is connected to agents such as plants, animals, geology, and humans, and how they interact, or even resist, each other. A history of the rural phenomena of cattle ranching would be incomplete if it only focused on the human side of things, while overlooking the presence and material agency of the cattle (LeCain 2017). The rural character of Retiro is far from the cattle ranches in Montana Timothy LeCain writes about, but it is nevertheless steeped in the material presence and agency of non-humans in the form of knotweed, gravel paths, crows, overgrown ponds, and storms. Such a notion of the rural might be a fruitful alternative to the emphasis on the urban that has saturated contemporary archaeology and neighbouring fields of study. What if we reversed the perspectives and studied the cities similarly to a farmstead, and fields similarly to metropolises? Would we gain interesting insights from such perspectives? In the age of anthropogenic climate change and pollution, it is perhaps necessary to employ such counter-intuitive perspectives, to see if they work or not. To begin to understand a complex place and ecology such as Retiro, it is necessary to include both its lingering rural past and its urban situation and to intermesh colourful graffiti on concrete foundations with arborglyphs carved into silver firs.

To answer the questions posed in the beginning, Retiro has not been totally transformed by the enveloping urban landscape because it retains concrete material ties to its original rural past. Retiro is a hybrid landscape, or, in another sense, a ‘recombinant ecology’ (cf. Rotherham 2017); it is perpetually becoming something new based on potentials embedded in its material past, whether it is the invasiveness of Japanese knotweed, or the old paths getting included into the architectural blueprints of a redevelopment. Despite the challenges of even finding the clear definition of what metrics constitute a city (i.e. Gaydarska 2016), it would be counterproductive to say that rurality and urbanity are illusory constructions. There is something irreconcilable between the avenue running through the centre of Molde and the pastureland and relict garden plants in Retiro – they are essentially different. Putting an urban lens on Retiro would yield different research results than a rural one – neither being truer than the other, but rather highlighting different characteristics, actors, or materials.

Laurent Olivier has noted that the contemporary process of global urbanization that has led to a disappearing rural environments, has been seen as largely uninteresting by archaeologists (2013: 122). What we stereotypically think of as rural is sometimes regarded as less dull and ‘lifeless’ when compared to urban landscapes (cf. Baines 2012). This generalization can surely be debated (e.g. Samuels 2012), but it is clear that much archaeological focus lately has been on post-industrial landscapes and ruins, and not least so in the development of an archaeology of more recent pasts. In some sense, this is understandable; the rural heritage of overgrown fields, deserted fishing villages, tree plantations, and fur farms, can be regarded as more materially and symbolically understated and inconspicuous than massive industrial facilities, military bases, or urban decay. Ruins in rural settings are also in some sense expected to be quaint, like the picturesque rural ruin “in harmony” with nature. Urban places are also easily accessible by scholars working for institutions that for the most part is located in the cities. The rural/urban divide, especially in the contemporary context, is moreover saturated with different kind of biases and stereotypes – from conservative hicks to latte-sipping liberals. Despite that some post-rural landscapes can be less materially striking, this does not mean they are less interesting or important. The affects and materiality of derelict and unmediated post-rural landscapes are important to investigate because they matter to people as present landscapes where one can happen upon lingering memories of rural pasts. To document and explore these places on their own terms in the present day, can lead to insight and glimpses into the otherness that such landscapes contain, cultivate, and mediate, as well as the affects they create. Places that might be regarded as rural, or even wild, as I have previously touched upon, forces one to confront non-humans more starkly than urban sites that are saturated with anthropocentric architecture, symbolisms, and not least politics. Archaeology as a discipline is especially suited and oriented towards things that are left behind (cf. González-Ruibal 2008). Hence, a period of accelerated urbanisation and centralisation is an opportunity for archaeologist to turn their attention towards the things and places that are left to their own devices.

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