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## CALAIS TOPOGRAPHICS: A PHOTO ESSAY.

*Liam Healy*

### ABSTRACT

The photos in this essay were taken in 2019, three years after the Jungle camp, Calais' largest improvised refugee camp, had been cleared in 2016 and re-landscaped into an eco-park. The images focus on what I see as the 'new topographics' of the Calais landscape. I have borrowed this phrase from William Jenkins' influential New Topographics exhibition from 1975 which radicalised the often romantic view of landscape photography to focus on 'man-altered' landscapes and infrastructures. In this series of photos, the infrastructures are those that participate in upholding the UK border in France.





The photos in this essay were taken in 2019, three years after the Jungle camp, Calais' largest improvised refugee camp, had been cleared in 2016 and re-landscaped into an eco-park.<sup>1</sup> The images focus on what I see as the 'new topographics' of the Calais landscape. I have borrowed this phrase from William Jenkins' influential *New Topographics* exhibition from 1975 which radicalised the often romantic view of landscape photography to focus on 'man-altered' landscapes, for example Bernd and Hiller Becher's photographs of pylons, mining infrastructures and steel mills.<sup>2</sup> In this series of photos, the infrastructures are those that participate in upholding the UK border in France. The 2003 Touquet agreement effectively moved the UK border to France so that border checks could be conducted before crossing the English Channel, effectively precluding many legal routes to asylum because migrants are unable to reach the country in order to initiate a claim. The most recurrent and prominent of the infrastructures to uphold this are the tall, closely knitted white steel fences and concrete walls that surround the port, Eurotunnel station, petrol stations and truck stops, as well as the former camp itself. This means that this border is made up of multiple instances of other 'mini' borders, for example the fences around truck stops and petrol stations are designed to prevent people gaining access to lorries so that they might board ferries undetected. While the fences and walls are most visible and somewhat expected, I have found through this research that forms of 'natural' ecology have also been enlisted to enforce the border.

Behind a large white fence, a short distance from the ferry port and running alongside the N216 highway is an eco-park (a 'Natura 2000 Habitat') which was once the site of the Jungle camp. Beginning in 2015, this camp was largely self-built by displaced people and volunteers on the far eastern edges of Calais' industrial region, a few kilometres from the main town and around half a kilometre from the ferry port. The

camp originally emerged owing to its proximity to the now demolished Jules Ferry migrant centre for women and children, formerly a disused sports centre and children's holiday camp. Though estimates vary, at its height in 2016 the camp was home to around 9,000 displaced people. This was not the first camp in Calais – there had been multiple other instances of 'the Jungle' before this, since the closure of a reception centre run by the Red Cross in Sangatte, a short distance outside Calais, in 2011.<sup>3</sup> However it was the largest and perhaps became the most notable, especially in the lead up to the Brexit referendum vote in 2016. At this time the camp attracted a great deal of interest (in terms of media, scholarship, and attention by architects and planners) owing to its self-built nature and residents' agency and ingenuity in constructing the camp as they saw fit in very challenging conditions, including building large and impressive religious buildings, schools, shops, restaurants and cafés.

On 27 October 2016 Fabienne Buccio, the departmental state representative of Pas-de-Calais, announced: 'we have fulfilled our mission; the humanitarian dismantling operation [of the Jungle] is over.'<sup>4</sup> The residents having been evicted and the site cleared at the end of 2016, the site has since received far less attention but continues to play an important role in the UK-France border. While highly punitive measures ensure that another camp is not built around Calais, the city is still home to a large number of displaced people who are not allowed to 'install themselves', essentially meaning that they are not allowed to sit or lay down.

1 The name of the camp comes from the Pashto 'dzhangal', roughly meaning 'forest' (Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 2016). The Jungle does not necessarily refer to one specific space but has been used to describe several encampments around Calais for more than ten years. Despite the problematic nature of this name I use 'Jungle' because those that I engaged with in the camp referred to it in this way, and I am persuaded that the name originates from its various inhabitants, rather than from external actors. However, it is important to note that it has also been used as a racist slur. I also purposefully refer to the Jungle as a 'refugee camp' despite it never having been officially recognised as one, to reject what I view as the weaponization of the label 'migrant' in popular media and political rhetoric to argue that those in Calais are

undeserving of asylum. Though 'refugee' has a specific legal definition, I refer to those I have engaged with by how they self-identify – typically as refugees and asylum seekers.

2 William Jenkins, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (International Museum of Photography, 1974) and 'Introduction to The New Topographics' in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*. (Rochester NY: International Museum of Photography, 1975).

3 Michael Agier and Yasmine Bouagga, *The Jungle: Calais' Camps and Migrants* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).





Shortly after the camp was cleared work began on landscaping the site into an eco-park. The Jungle was turned into a garden. The peopled roads, shops and shelters that I had encountered in previous field work in the camp in 2016 had been replaced with fen orchids and other flowers, thick scrub, a small herd of horses, artificially constructed sand dunes, various small ponds, boardwalks, and a bird viewing hide. When I visited in both 2017 and 2019 the site was almost devoid of people. I spoke with a relatively small number of displaced people on these trips to when I visited in 2016, finding that those migrating through Calais now needed to be far more careful in revealing their locations (e.g. to researchers, police, local residents), often trying to remain hidden by sleeping and hiding in small woods and bushes in the suburbs and outskirts of the city. With the Jungle removed, displaced people are forced into a constant movement, silently occupying unseen, obscured and fenced-in parts of the city and its suburbs. Indeed, this kind of invisibility is in part important and necessary for displaced people in Calais, their aim being to cross the border undetected. The removal of the Calais camp has had a marked effect, making migrating through Calais far harder and even more dangerous than when the Jungle camp existed, with regular clearances of small encampments, tents and personal belongings, as well as regular reports of violence enacted by the police.

Borders are often imagined, visualised and mapped as simple lines drawn to demarcate certain areas, but borderscape scholars have for some time argued that borders are not static, spatial or geographic entities, like a line or a single space.<sup>5</sup> They are heterogenous, located in legal practices and policy, variously enacted by both humans and non-humans, including police, border guards and objects such as walls, fences and passports, and are distinctive for different people (e.g. citizens or non-citizens), and things, such as goods. The borderscape is an important concept for paying attention to

sites such as the former Jungle, because it attunes us (researchers, designers, architects) to the ways that borders are produced and upheld by practices that may not be immediately recognisable or obvious.

Returning to Calais, we see that transforming and landscaping the site of the former camp has become another form of somewhat unexpected bordering practice. Here, 'natural' ecology is cultivated to erase displaced people, their histories, architectures and practices for survival. Though the process of reclassifying the site as a nature reserve was planned before the camp emerged, the original plans were subsequently altered not only to encourage forms of nature, but with an explicit aim to exclude human life. While the eco-park was being constructed the then interior minister Bruno Le Roux gave a radio interview to explain that the task for landscaping this particular site was not only to re-introduce nature, but to make sure that no more camps would emerge.<sup>6</sup> In the camp-become-eco-park rare and protected fen orchid flowers have taken root alongside thick scrub, which begin to act as border agents. In addition to the quite obvious wire fencing surrounding the former camp, ponds flood the area to create new habitats for the birds, but also to prevent people from being able to camp or sleep in between the dunes. In addition to the forms of nature that are mobilised to restrict access and use, new architectures such as boardwalks and bird-viewing hides – ostensibly for tourists to experience and view the eco-park – provide the regularly patrolling CRS police with vantage points for surveilling the area and ensuring no camp will be built here again.<sup>7</sup>

4 Translated and cited in Dan Hicks and Sarah Mallet, *Land: The Calais 'Jungle' and Beyond*, (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019); Dominique Salomez, 'Fabienne Buccio, la préfète du Pas-de-Calais en première ligne', *La Voix du Nord*, 29 October. <https://www.lavoixdunord.fr/66830/article/2016-10-29/fabienne-buccio-la-prefete-du-pas-de-calais-en-premiere-ligne> (accessed 11 December 2023).

5 Chiara Brambilla, Jussi Laine and Gianluca Bocchi, *Borderscaping: Imaginations and Practices of Border Making* (London: Routledge, 2015); Elena Dell'agnese and Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary (2015) 'Borderscapes: From Border Landscapes to Border Aesthetics', *Geopolitics* 20.1-10 (2015) doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2015.1014284.

6 Priscilla Vandeville, *Le Ministre de l'Intérieur ne laissera pas s'installer une nouvelle jungle à Calais*, (2017) <https://www.radio6.fr/article-23385-le-ministre-de-interieur-ne-laissera-pas-installer-unenouvelle-jungle-a-calais.html> (accessed 17 March 2021).

7 The CRS (Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité) are the branch of the French police most often employed to deal with crowd and riot control. In Calais, the police have been regularly accused of violence against refugees, and police violence was (and still is) regularly reported as a state tactic for dealing with displaced people living in Calais (Meadows, 2019; Refugee Info Bus, 2019) and to a lesser extent volunteers working with refugees (Vigny, 2018).































On a site such as this, scratching the surface of the veneer of the eco-park reveals a site that is made up of ruins built among more ruins. The site of the camp-become eco-park is surrounded by chemical factories (e.g. a Graftech factory is prominent in the photographs), giving the air a toxic thickness and stench. Parts of the land had previously been used as landfill sites and were designated as contaminated with hazardous industrial substances under the Seveso III European Union (EU) Directive.<sup>8</sup> This meant that when the French authorities and contractors came to clear the camp many of the remaining objects and pieces of architecture were churned into the sand dunes as another kind of landfill. Over time, these sand dunes gradually shift with the weather, meaning on my trips to the site, objects from the former camp haunt the eco-park regularly become exposed, refusing the rot down or to stay covered by the pleasant veneer of eco-park. On my visits since the camp was removed I have found clothing, toothbrushes, Lego pieces and other toys, as well as dozens of empty CS gas containers.<sup>9</sup>

of weeds, much as there is an ecology of bad ideas; ecologies flourish and ecologies produce the scent and scenes of death.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the eco-park should perhaps be thought of as the pleasant veneer of what the UK government have called ‘the creation of a hostile environment’.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, this argument should not be read as adopting a normative argument that humans should take precedent over forms of nature, but rather to tune into what the relationships between these natures and politics are, and what they might tell us about borders. By thinking of the Jungle as a garden it becomes apparent that it contains very particular forms of (and relations between) natures and humans that are the upshot of deliberate design and therefore politics.<sup>12</sup> When seen in a cosmopolitical sense, the design of this garden is anything but neutral, and requires us to unpick how nature becomes instrumentalised and mobilised in this kind of setting to further constrain already marginalised people, and to create new forms of border.

It is very difficult to argue against an eco-park, because the mobilisation of ‘nature’, and ‘ecology’ seems to be suggestive of a time before politics. It is beyond the scope of this short article, but what is at stake here is that the way in which ‘nature’ is understood (as somehow neutral, inherently good) means it resists criticism, and can be deployed very effectively to reinforce inequalities. Of course, this is well known when we look at practices like green-washing. In the Jungle-become-garden eco-park, mastery over nature takes on an additional political dimension to prevent particular presences or possibilities of human life on the site. As H el ene Frichot has reminded us, ‘to assume that ecology demarcates a basic good is to overlook Bateson’s reminder that there is an ecology

8 Thom Davies, Arshad Isakjee and Surindar Dhesi, *Violent Inaction: The Necropolitical Experience of Refugees in Europe*, Antipode. Epub ahead of print 1 January 2017. DOI: 10.1111/anti.12325.

9 Liam Healy, *DUF Zine 10: The Site of the Former Jungle, Calais* (DUF, 2018) and *DUF Zine 11: Objects From the Former Jungle Camp, Calais* (DUF, 2018).

10 H el ene Frichot, *Creative Ecologies: Theorizing the Practice of Architecture* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), p. 62.

11 Theresa May, Speech by Home Secretary on second reading of Immigration Bill (2013) <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-by-home-secretary-on-second-reading-of-immigration-bill> (accessed 5 March 2020).

12 Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva, ‘Give me a gun and I will make all buildings move: An ANT’s view of architecture’, in *Explorations in architecture: Teaching, design, research* (Basel: Birkh user Verlag Ag, 2008), pp. 80-89.



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Liam Healy is a design-researcher and lecturer based at the University of Sheffield School of Architecture. His research interests sit at the intersection of design and social research, centring around situated critical and speculative design and research practices, DIY design, care, and exploring design with a more-than human ethic. Liam is currently working on an AHRC funded research project exploring access and relations to woodlands and forests, and an ongoing ethnography of bike trail builders. Liam has PhD in design awarded by Goldsmiths, University of London and titled: *Designing Unlikely Futures? A/symmetry & A-firmative Speculation in the European Borderscape*.



