

# Phosphatvilles

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Territory,  
Settlements and  
Architecture  
in the Moroccan  
extraction site  
of Ouled Abdoun



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- École d'Architecture et de Paysage de Casablanca (EAC)
- Memory of Moroccan Modern Architects (MAMMA)
- Casamémoire

### Associated partners

- PhD Course in Architecture, Design, Knowledge and Protection of Cultural Heritage - DIDA - Department of Architecture - University of Florence
- Politecnico di Milano - AUIC School - ABC Department
- NOSTOI Cultural Association

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

DIPARTIMENTO  
DI ARCHITETTURA



Un certain regard  
sur les choses  
du quotidien

~

Mining Cities  
of Morocco

## The Research Locations

Promoted and coordinated by the Department of Architecture at the University of Bologna, the *Villes Minières du Maroc (VDM)* project has involved collaborations with several Italian partners, including the PhD Course in Architecture, Design, Knowledge and Protection of Cultural Heritage - DIDA - Department of Architecture - University of Florence, the Politecnico di Milano - AUIC School - ABC Department, NOSTOI Cultural Association, and several Moroccan partners, such as the Casablanca School of Architecture and Landscape (EAC) and the associations Memory of Moroccan Modern Architects (MAMMA) and Casamémoire based in Casablanca. These various institutions and associations aimed to study a large region of Morocco involved in phosphate extraction. A shared project would lead each partner, drawing on its own areas of expertise, to develop landscape, urban, and architectural analyses of extraction sites linked to the cities of Khouribga, Youssoufia and Benguerir, to investigate their criticalities and potential.

The theme of mining cities and landscapes, which characterizes entire regions of Morocco, integrates into the international debate, raising many questions not only about the future of the architectural heritage of working-class cities built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and large industrial buildings, but also about the environmental conditions of an industrialized area that dominates the vast desert region known as the “phosphate valley” (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> More than a century after the foundation of the first cities and villages planned by the Office Chérifien des Phosphates<sup>2</sup> (now OCP Group SA), there are many issues that deserve attention, not only in view of possible preservation, enhancement, and redevelopment projects for the mining towns of origin but also concerning the opportunity to plan large-scale strategic actions aimed at converting areas occupied by mining sites that are now partially or fully decommissioned. Over time, the changing economic, social, and cultural conditions of the mining cities have influenced the appearance of the settlement cores; the mining industry has impacted the balances governing the infrastructural, territorial, and



- 1 “The renewed attention to Moroccan phosphates following the Moroccan-Iranian agreement, which led to the establishment of a new centre in Benguerir and the promotion of Khouribga, the oldest extraction centre, to provincial capital since 1969, according to Hervé Bleuchot, represented an opportunity for researchers interested in examining the economic and human issues posed by the mining cities and industries of North Africa, particularly to study their relationship with traditional environments and their role in the urbanization of North Africa.” See Bleuchot Hervé, *Une ville minière marocaine: Khouribga*, in “Revue de l’Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée”, 6, 1969, pp. 29-51.
- 2 “In 1914, traces of phosphate were found near El Boroui. Subsequently, research was undertaken by the Mining Service, and in 1919, the existence of an immense phosphate deposit in Western Morocco was confirmed. There was no time to waste. Although much of the country was not yet under the authority of His Majesty the Sultan, the decree of August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1920, supplemented by a series of decrees issued by the Visir, established the *Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP)*, responsible for exploiting this wealth, which would provide immeasurable support to the economy of Morocco,” in *O.C.P., L’Effort social de l’O.C.P. en faveur de ses ouvriers*, Imprimerie Maroc-Matin, Rabat 1952, p. 7.

1 Benguerir. Ph. S. Rössli, 2023.



urban systems, as well as the public and private space of living. The consequences of the transformations are evident when analysing the relationships that exist between the urban fabric and architectural design of the cities examined, especially when evaluating the quality of domestic space in relation to the changing needs of the resident communities over time.

Examined on a territorial scale the landscape aspects of the mining cities and small settlements scattered across the vast, uncultivated plains have yet to be comprehensively addressed. Environmental issues resulting from the alteration of natural landscapes due to the establishment of large industrial plants for the storage and processing of phosphates are evident (**figs. 2, 3**).

In light of the vast areas affected by excavations, where industrial plants and infrastructure have altered the landscape of desert regions by incorporating a succession of cities built to serve the mines, there appear to be no strategic, long-term, integrated initiatives aimed at redeveloping the architectural heritage and regenerating the environmental landscape. The OCP has planned, and partly initiated, reconversion processes for urban and peri-urban areas that were previously occupied by extraction sites and phosphate processing plants. These are primarily programmes aimed at restoring decommissioned industrial buildings<sup>3</sup> and promoting technological innovation processes to implement new city models that are less sensitive to local building traditions and the architectural and cultural heritage of the founding cities.<sup>4</sup>

The complexity of the research topic led the group of faculties at the Department of Architecture of the University of Bologna to design an interdisciplinary study. Therefore, the *Villes Minières du Maroc* research sought to leverage the scientific expertise of researchers who approached the subject from different perspectives, aiming to provide new insights. To understand the factors influencing settlement choices and the transformation processes of the original mining cities, the study focused on Khouribga, the first settlement nucleus founded at the Ouled Abdoun phosphate sedimentary basin. The study also examined other cities with the same geological foundation, such as Bou Djeniba and Bou Lanouar, reaching Youssoufia (formerly Louis-Gentil) and the village of Mzinda, which are connected to the Gantour geological deposit (**fig. 4**).

Khouribga, the first planned city within the “phosphate plateau” region,<sup>5</sup> is part of a series of extraction campaigns planned in the

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Khouribga. Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.

3  
Khouribga. Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.

3 See, for example, the project for the “Cultural Center - OCP Drying Plant KHOURIBGA” currently under construction. Available on: [www.atelierbertrandhouin.com/copie-de-parc-priv%C3%A9-ibiza](http://www.atelierbertrandhouin.com/copie-de-parc-priv%C3%A9-ibiza) (Last Access: October 2024).

4 See SADV, *Ville Verte Benguerir. Un projet ouvert sur le monde et tourné vers l'avenir* (currently under construction).

5 Hervé Bleuchot, *Une ville minière marocaine: Khouribga*, in “Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée”, 1969, 6, p. 29.

northeastern area of the Ouled Abdoun deposit, in the Oued Zem territory, about 100 km southeast of Casablanca. Alongside the initial phase of phosphate extraction and transportation using temporary means, the OCP also began constructing infrastructure and a railway network to establish a direct link between Casablanca and the emerging city. Among Morocco's primary phosphate deposits, the Khouribga area is considered one of the richest phosphate production sites in the world. However, its strategic location, supported by abundant underground resources, was also enhanced by its geographical position, connecting it to Casablanca, an African gateway for global trade and a major port from which raw and processed phosphates continue to be shipped internationally.

Like Youssoufia and Mzinda, Khouribga also exhibits urban and architectural forms that deserve analysis due to their analogical character, which aligns them with Moroccan building traditions. Of particular interest is the relationship between architecture and place, regarding the adopted housing models and their transformation over time; the connection between natural and built landscapes in defining the boundary between city and countryside; and the use of public space and its role in relation to the large-scale infrastructures that connect extraction hubs, forming continuous territorial systems. When analysing the urban morphology of Khouribga's historic core, two main reference models emerge: the horizontal city, organized in a dense grid of interconnected courtyard houses, and the open layout of the European city, from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, characterized by alternating garden lots and houses. In an effort to accommodate distinct social categories, such as workers and white collar employees, who would become the city's inhabitants, Khouribga became an experimental ground where contrasting urban visions coexisted. The clear cultural divide between the local style chosen for the workers' city, the *Medina du Séchage*, and the imported European model chosen for the executives' city, *Ville des Cadres*, deriving from the urban theories developed in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, is reflected not only in the architectural language but also in the different conceptions of public space. While the medina design represents a vernacular settlement model, lending itself to the layout of a modern workers' city, the garden city model offers a foundational principle ensuring a quality of living consistent with European standards (figs. 5, 6).

An orthogonal grid underlies the structure of the workers' city, defining the relationships between open and closed spaces, private and public courtyards, where compact clusters of low houses develop continuously around the main square, where the mosque and the most representative buildings are located. Meanwhile, geometric axial layouts marked by tree-lined avenues shape the plots where single-family and semi-detached houses, public areas, and collective services, as well as sports centres immersed in greenery, are found. These two settlement models thus reflect the specific architectural and cultural identities of the communities accustomed to coexisting in the same



4 El Gantour. Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.

5 Khouribga. *Medina du Séchage*, Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.

6 Youssoufia. *Cité des Cadres*, Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.





city, respecting their own habitus. Although the consolidated core of the historic city offers urban planning solutions that reinterpret traditional living in a modern form, the principles driving the new transformation policies, as well as the urban planning forecasts governing the expansion programmes of Khouribga, remain unclear. Important subdivision processes, common to other sites in the phosphate valley, surround the city's peri-urban areas, fragmenting the land with urbanization interventions that suggest scattered buildings and open spaces lacking community gathering places (figs. 7, 8). The variety of modification processes that mark the history of the founding city, particularly the extemporaneous transformations and additions made by residents of the *Medina du Séchage*, can be interpreted as a complementary phenomenon to the expansion of the peri-urban area, demonstrating the vitality of a historic core where the community seeks spontaneous ways to renew living spaces, respecting its cultural roots.

### Photographic Exploration: A Method of Field Research

As part of the interdisciplinary nature of the research, two photographic campaigns allowed the exploration of different aspects that describe the contemporary landscape, enriching the experience of the research team.<sup>6</sup> Since its origins, photography has been an extraordinary tool for exploring architecture and landscapes, documenting large construction sites and infrastructural transformations of the territory, such as the *Mission héliographique*, proposed by the *Commission des Monuments Historiques* (CMH) and organized by the French government in 1851 to catalogue major monuments in France, considered the first public photography commission.<sup>7</sup> Photographs from the Protectorate of Morocco archives, some of which are included in this volume, validate the choice to support photographic campaigns, not only to document the construction phases of a new industrial and social landscape but also to use images as a tool for propaganda.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of advancing new technological means that offer new possibilities for reading and analysing the landscape, photography remains a crucial tool for representing the true nature of *places* through what appears on the surface of things. But, in the various meanings that the term *place* can assume in a landscape exploration project,

7  
Khouribga, Oulad Abdoune.  
Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.

8  
Khouribga, Oulad Abdoune.  
Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.

6 The photographic campaigns led to the realization of the projects “Sur la route des Villes Minières” by Massimo Sordi and “Les choses du quotidien” by Stefania Rössl. These projects were carried out during the trip to Morocco planned as part of the research programme *Villes Minières du Maroc*. The trip, which took place from September 30<sup>th</sup> to October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024, involved the participation of professors, tutors, and students from the University of Bologna, as well as several faculty members from EAC in Casablanca.

7 See De Mondenard Anne, *La Mission Héliographique. Cinq photographes parcourant la France en 1851*, MONUM – Éditions du Patrimoine, Paris 2022.

8 See Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères/Archives Diplomatiques. Available on: [www.basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/exl-php/recherche/mae\\_internet\\_\\_images](http://www.basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/exl-php/recherche/mae_internet__images), (Last Access: October 2024).

what value does *place* hold? Particularly interesting in correlating photography and landscape is the interpretation of the term *place* by Michel De Certeau. Starting from the distinction between *place* and *space*, commonly associated with landscape, he defines a *place* as “any order according to which elements are distributed in coexisting relationships. This excludes the possibility that two things could be in the same place. [...] *Space* arises when direction vectors, speed quantities, and *time* variables are considered. [...] The street, geographically defined by urban planning, is transformed into space by walkers. Similarly, reading is the space produced through the practice of place, which constitutes a system of signs – a writing” (figs. 9, 10).<sup>9</sup> Acting within the *place* and including the factor of action that relates to *space*, intimately connected to the concept of *time*, photography then leads us to grasp the specifics of the inhabited landscape through a representation that neither cartography, nor drawing, nor even new satellite tools can provide. Usually, Michael Jakob states, we tend to equate *landscape* and *space*, overlooking another fundamental category, *time*. “According to the definition by geographer Yi Fu Tuan, landscape is precisely the irruption of time into space: every frame representing a landscape in perspective and every photograph teaches us to see time *crossing* space.”<sup>10</sup>



For this reason, the research has chosen to utilize, in addition to archival materials, the surveys and drawings made by students following field trips and surveys conducted on-site, as well as a series of photographic images taken in the cities of Khouribga, Sidi Bou Lanouar, Bou Djeniba, Youssoufia, El Gantour, Mzinda, Beni-Melal, and Benguerir. The contemporary iconographic repertoire documents the main points of interest in the Mining Cities and the adjacent and interstitial territories. Other cities and locations, such as El Jadida, Rabat, Casablanca, Fes, and Sidi Harazem, complete the visual mapping of the territory, understood as a recomposition by fragments of the different sites traversed (figs. 11, 12).



The photographs reveal the characteristics of a landscape in transformation, where the material of the soil appears, in its various manifestations, as a common and unifying element.<sup>11</sup> The substance that emerges to the surface, following the processing of phosphates, represents the living matter of photographic research, which divides between representation of the artifact and modelling of the landscape; the darkness of the underground is evoked by the light that reveals the

9  
Sidi Bou Lanouar.  
Ph. M. Sordi, 2023.

10  
Benguerir. Ph. M. Sordi, 2023.

11  
Khouribga, Oulad Abdoune.  
Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.

12  
Khouribga, Oulad Abdoune.  
Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.

9 De Certeau Michel, *L'invention du quotidien. L'art de faire*, Edition Gallimard, Paris, 1990, pp. 175-176.

10 Jakob Michael, *Il paesaggio*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2009, p. 60.

11 The word “soil” carries many metaphorical meanings, but above all, literal and material meanings. [...] But soil is primarily living matter. Each soil is an ecosystem of situated relationships and mixtures between humans and non-humans, between living and non-living things. Rattalino Elisabetta, Duarte German, Facchetti Andrea, “Introduction” in Rattalino Elisabetta, Duarte German, Facchetti Andrea. (eds.), *Soils Matter: Intersezioni tra arte e scienza*, b-r-u-n-o.it, Venice 2023, p. 7.

physiognomy of the territory on the surface, by the same light, which is the “origin of every form,” the essence of the image.<sup>12</sup> The field surveys have led to the discovery of a new visual geography in the areas of interest, complementing the drawings. A detailed exploration of the different contexts prompts a closer consideration of the complexity along with the specificities of mining landscapes. The interconnections established between the different natures of the landscape are highlighted by photographic detail, suggesting analogical relationships, and identifying the physiognomy of a territory where the geological matrix is perceived on a broader scale (**fig. 13**). The photographic campaigns



examined the founding cities of the main mining sites, but also the open landscapes interspersed among the populated centres. We might define them as “in-between” territories, these void spaces, lacking defined limits or boundaries, characterized by a primordial geological nature of the soil.<sup>13</sup> Traversing cities and peripheral areas, the investigation confronted desert plains where human presence is recognized in episodic enclaves of rural extraction in harmony with the place. In this context, the perfect synthesis between geographic and geological landscape, which traditionally merges material extracted from the soil and architectural construction, clashes with the orographic and morphological modifications caused by the extraction processes of the mining industry.

The photographic explorations reinforced the hypothesis that the alteration factors of the “phosphate valley,” such as excavation, extraction, drying, and material transport processes over a century, in continuous evolution, have shaped the nature of the places (**fig. 14**). Episodic hilly profiles created from phosphate processing waste testify to the artificiality of the vast arid regions, sparsely inhabited, that evoke the “great void,” those uncolonized places that no one wishes to assign to colonization. “They are – writes Zygmunt Bauman – the ‘remaining’ places once the structuring of the most desirable spaces has been completed; they owe their spectral presence to the lack of overlap between the elegance of structure and the chaos of the world.”<sup>14</sup>

If we agree that the photographic discipline does not arise to provide univocal answers regarding the investigated subject and, implicitly, to the dimension of reality, it is evident that thanks to this extraordinary visual *medium*, diverse lines of research can develop from the same places. Lewis Baltz’s position appears clarifying regarding this concept. Referring to the well-known campaign commissioned by the

13  
Oulad Zarrad. Ph. M. Sordi, 2023.

14  
Sidi Bou Lanouar.  
Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.

12 See Adams Robert, *The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range*, Colorado Associated University Press, 1974.

13 “There is a difference between ‘between’ and ‘in-between’. [...] ‘Between’ articulates a divided world that is already cut at the seams. [...] ‘In-between’, on the contrary, represents a movement of generation and dissolution in a world in flux, where things are not yet given—in order to be joined later—but are on the verge of becoming so. Ingold Tim, *Siamo linee. Per un’ecologia delle relazioni sociali*, Treccani, Rome 2024.

14 Bauman Zygmunt, *Modernità liquida*, Laterza, Bari, 2002, pp. 115-116.

Farm Security Administration (FSA), which was meant to raise public awareness for new recovery and revitalization programmes in New Deal America,<sup>15</sup> and more specifically to the work of Walker Evans, Baltz stated: “For Evans, photography was neither document nor art, but rather a practice closer to the novel: a tool for creating a literature of images using real facts to construct artificial realities that would reveal truths.”<sup>16</sup>

The photographic campaigns conducted in Morocco have thus allowed for observing the state of the places to understand the multiple aspects concerning the mining cities and the context in which they are situated (fig. 15). The stops invited attention not only to the evidence of architectural artifacts but also to the less prominent aspects of the landscape, those drawing from everyday culture, which Perce called the “infra-ordinary.”<sup>17</sup> In this perspective, reality represents the substance, the point of origin from which, within the process of photographing, thought and action converge to the construction of the image. If the observer is the one who intervenes in the perceptual decoding of the object portrayed, within the image, it is the same subjects, animated or inanimate, that are the first witnesses of the places. They become interpreters of the sense of belonging or, conversely, alienation, in which the principle of truth is preserved (fig. 16). “Since photography does not narrate: it names things,”<sup>18</sup> from the browsing of the repertoire of images drawn from field observation, overlaps of signs emerge, metaphors of a morphologically and geologically stratified landscape, modern resources for the iconographic and geographic recomposition of the places. “Earth stratification” – Smithson stated – “is a chaotic museum. Imprinted in the sediment is a text where limits and boundaries transcend rational order and the social structures that imprison it.”<sup>19</sup> In the process of reading the environment, the photographic apparatus, a *medium serving the eye*, intervenes, triggering a metamorphosis process destined to convert the manifestations of reality into significant images. The photographs help decode the signs that denote the nature of urban and architectural space, of physical and cultural landscape, of material and immaterial heritage. Through the use of the image, the genesis of the evolving mining landscapes is better clarified, which are bearers of a latent memory and a “geological



- 15 See Quintavalle Arturo Carlo, (ed.), *Farm Security Administration (La fotografia sociale americana del New Deal)*, Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione, University of Parma, Notebook n. 25, Parma 1975.
- 16 Baltz Lewis, “Il più americano dei fotografi”, in Baltz Lewis, *Scritti*, Johan & Levi, Milano 2014, p. 22.
- 17 Perce George, *L'infra-ordinaire*, Seuil, Paris, 1989.
- 18 Hers François, Latarjet Bernand, *La Mission photographique de la DATAR*, in Valtorta R. (ed.) *Fotografia e committenza pubblica. Esperienze storiche e contemporanee*, Lupetti, Milano 2009, p. 55.
- 19 Smithson Robert, “A sedimentation of the mind: Earth Projects”, *Artforum*, December 1967, reprinted in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, Holt Nancy (ed.), New York University Press, New York 1979, p. 83.

15  
Benguerir. Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.

16  
Khouribga. Ph. S. Rössl, 2023.



time,” as Robert Smithson would define it. His reflection on the relationship between soil material and landscape, which includes the dimension of time, brings him closer to the theories of chronological layers elaborated by French historian Fernand Braudel. He identified three temporal modes: the time of the individual or “biological time,” the time of human cultures or “social time,” and the slower time of environmental, climatic, and demographic change that he defined as “geographical time.”<sup>20</sup> And it is precisely through understanding the geological element that man can truly be part of his time as involved in an evolving process, feeling an integral part of a landscape that asks to be decoded. The awareness of belonging to a geological time thus leads to considering the cities and landscapes of the mining industry as holders of a heritage of inestimable value which, for this reason, deserve even more to be protected and preserved (**fig. 17**).

### Determinants of the Landscape

The territory in which the mining cities of Khouribga, Youssoufia, and Benguerir are located presents itself as a vast desert region, either flat or semi-hilly, traversed by excavation areas that extend seamlessly for several hundred kilometres. The element that unites the succession of settlements is the substance of the underground that emerges on the surface, characterizing the soil. As extensively documented in the volume celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of OCP,<sup>21</sup> phosphates have an ancient history, predating the Tertiary era, when the current desert was occupied by the sea. The marine origin is indeed responsible for the rich presence of phosphates in the Moroccan subsoil. This precious resource for the global economy of the country was discovered just over a century ago, in 1912, with extractions beginning in 1921. Understanding the origin of the soil’s material not only leads to knowing the physical nature of the places but also allows for greater awareness regarding “reciprocal relationships,” also definable as “natural connections” that spontaneously establish between people and places. Therefore, exploring a territory means *digging*, geologically traversing a temporal dimension to uncover traces of a shared history that allows the past to reconnect with the present (**fig. 18**).

By its nature, photography relates to the present time. But what is the present if not an accumulation of signs meant to nourish contemporaneity? “Contemporaneity is a singular relationship with one’s time, adhering to it and, at the same time, taking distance from it; more precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a displacement and an anachronism.”<sup>22</sup> For this reason, from a photographic point of view, every clue can reveal stories, people and places, small and large changes, evolutions, unexpected situations, and

20 Lingwood James, *The Weight of Time*, in Bernd & Hilla Becher, Robert Smithson. Field Trips, hopefulmonster, Torino 2002, pp. 75-76.

21 See *Office Chérifien des Phosphates 1921-1946*, Éditions Africaines Perceval, Rabat 1948.

22 Agamben Giorgio, *Che cos'è il contemporaneo?* Nottetempo, Milano 2019, p. 9.

chance factors that determine human actions. Each single frame, as well as the distance of the viewpoint, constitutes occasions to analyse more deeply the physical substance of things in an attempt to approach, photographically, the expression of truth. In the essay *Truth and Landscape*, Robert Adams argues that “art asserts that nothing is banal, which is to say that a serious landscape picture is a metaphor. If a view of geography does not imply something more enduring than a specific piece of terrain, then the picture will hold us only briefly; we will probably prefer the place itself, which we can smell and feel and hear as well as see – though we are also likely to come away from the actual scene hoping somewhere to find in art. This is because geography by itself is difficult to value accurately – what we hope for from the artist is help in discovering the significance of a place.”<sup>23</sup>



Observing the photographs of Timothy O’Sullivan (1840-1882) and Carleton Watkins (1829-1916), which document the mining sites of the American West in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, some analogies with the physical characteristics of the Moroccan phosphate valley region become evident. Relating to the experiences of O’Sullivan and Watkins, Adams saw in the images of the two pioneers of American photography a “rigorous” attitude, characterized by “care for things.” In their photographic approach, he identified a line of continuity with the essential characteristics of “classical vision.” Interestingly, about a hundred years later, the same American landscapes became a new field of study for a group of young photographers, the “new topographers,”<sup>24</sup> who, starting from that experience, affirmed a new way of looking at the landscape and understanding photography.

In the photographs displayed in the famous exhibition *New Topographics. Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, held in Rochester in 1975, the silent and desert-like landscapes of the American West were occupied by scattered subdivisions that hinted at the realization of new settlements and imminent building processes. The images produced by the *new topographers* were no longer interesting in showing the places as autonomous facts and part of an unspoiled landscape but rather intended to reveal the modifications of the landscape, considered now a mere “product.” Faced with places he deemed irreparably mistreated and scarred, Adams sought in photography a tool for reconciliation. In comparison, using photography, Lewis Baltz announced a culture of rejection and waste. The gaze of the *new topographers* turned to observing what was abandoned and acted passively in the environment, corrupting the landscape. Their images revolve around the waste materials produced by construction sites, portray-

23 Adams Robert, “Truth and landscape” in *Beauty in photography*, Aperture, New York 1996, pp. 15-16.

24 The photographers involved in the experience were Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel Jr. See *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, 1975.

ing anthropic signs of settlements and infrastructures. The portrait of things, rather than of people, was perceived as the main interpreter of a broader landscape while waste became a metaphor for society and the culture of progress. “The *New Topographics* were inspired by great precursors: the magazine *Landscape*, created in 1951 by the geographer John Brinkerhoff Jackson, first highlighted how a place’s identity was closely tied to its uses. The landscape itself thus became a construction born from the needs of its inhabitants.”<sup>25</sup> Breaking free from the traditional way of understanding seductive photography and instead using photography to express the alteration of the contemporary landscape was one of the objectives of the *New Topographics* exhibition, which aimed to raise visitors’ awareness of a reality that contemporary society was contributing to create.

In 2025, fifty years will have passed since the Rochester exhibition, a fundamental experience not only for the history of photography but also for the visual culture of the twentieth century. Besides confirming the autonomous status of the discipline, American photographic campaigns have emphasized the value of photography as a tool for affirming another space and time. By asserting the value of images as documentary sources, a central role is implicitly assigned to the archive, where not only material testimonies are preserved but also the memories of places are reconstructed. However – as Gilles Clément argues – “the landscape is constructed in the gaze, and it finds its home in memory (...) The image of a moment becomes art, and through this inevitable process of appropriating space, art becomes heritage.”<sup>26</sup>

“But what else could memory provide?” Michel De Certeau asks. “It consists of flashes and particular fragments. A detail, or many details, are memories. Each of them, when set against the shadow, relates to a whole from which it is missing. It shines like a metonymy in relation to the whole. [...] The strangest thing is undoubtedly the *mobility* of this memory in which details are never what they are: neither objects, since they escape as such; nor fragments, since they are not sufficient unto themselves, nor stable, as each recall alters them.”<sup>27</sup>

25 Sicard Monique, “La fotografia e il concetto di paesaggio”, in Bogherrini M., Sicard M., (eds.), *Photo Paysage. Il paesaggio inventato della fotografia*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2020, p. 30.

26 Clément Gilles, *Breve trattato sull'arte involontaria*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2019, p. 99.

27 De Certeau Michel, *L'invention du quotidien. L'art de faire*, Edition Gallimard, Paris, 1990, pp. 137-138.

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