

A Journey Through Modern Foundations:

Re-Imagining Modernity in the Work of Photolanguage

Dr Robin Wilson

r.wilson@ucl.ac.uk

Keywords:

photography

found objects

regional modernism

sunken gardens

ruins

figural latency

spatial dialectic

horizon

Abstract

This article reflects on the use of arts based research methods to engage with a regional history of modern architecture and urbanism. Moving between archival sources and remaining physical sites in East Sussex, the art practice Photolanguage (Nigel Green & Robin Wilson) documented and reimagined the modernist legacy in this region of Southern England. Through photography, the gathering of found objects and notation, we construct 'new' narratives of place, working across, or in between the official, or dominant, narratives of local history. This reflection back on the production of work for the exhibition East Sussex Modern (2016), focuses on our adoption of the modern 'sunken garden' as a recurrent, topographic theme, and our exploration and projective appropriation of found ruins as alternative examples of this official, municipal typology of public space.

The work of Photolanguage (Nigel Green & Robin Wilson) has consistently engaged with the remains of modernism within the post-industrial city and its hinterland landscapes, in project sites that have included the cities of Rouen, Calais, Gloucester, Copenhagen, Malmö and Paris. The practice employs an experimental use of image and text within its projects to both record and also re-imagine the modern urban artefact, to surcharge the photographically recorded object with different narrative possibilities. The media and methods of 're-imagining' are diverse, involving the use of different strategies of digital and material image production, montage and assemblage. However, they are deployed with deference to the

essential capacity of photography itself to transform, to offer a perceptual reengagement and critical reconceptualization of its object. The theme of ‘radical foundations’ is employed here as a framework through which to reflect on the meaning and efficacy of this ‘perceptual reengagement’ in relation to urban and landscape sites encountered in our participation in the exhibition project *East Sussex Modern* (2016).ⁱ

As a work of practice-based research this article constructs its discourse from the period of artistic practice that preceded it. It is not simply intended to be a linear account of that project, but is a theorized reflection which also explores its research processes and representations further. As a journey back through the work, it affects a certain reconfiguration of the sequence of the work’s original evolution. It discovers and explores associations both active and latent in the original phase of work. In this sense, the article pursues a conception of research as, to borrow the words of Rolf Hughes, ‘another form of architectonic practice’, and seeks to clarify and evolve the initial performance of the work as a creative and critical inquiry. (Hughes, 2006: 284)

The brief of the project *East Sussex Modern* was to produce art work that responded to the legacy of modernist architecture in the region of East Sussex, with a particular focus on the role of the Borough and Water Engineer Sidney Little (1885-1961) in the interwar period. Little was responsible for the now destroyed St Leonard’s Bathing Pool and Lido (1933) and much of the existing, multi-level seafront of Hastings and St Leonards (1938). A committed modernist, Little also harboured more ambitious plans to extend the concept of the multi-level city to Hastings on a broader scale, to separate vehicle from pedestrian spaces. While these plans remained unrealized, Little did extensively modernize the water infrastructure of the Hastings agglomeration, with deep tunnelled aqueducts connecting the town to new concrete dams at Powdermill (1932) and Darwell (1949).

Photolanguage’s contribution to the exhibition was entitled ‘Journeys in a Modern Topography’. Our journey began as a series of fieldtrips to key sites relating to Little’s work within the region, but it also involved the incremental construction of new, associative connections between these sites, combining an ‘official’ itinerary of Little’s built, modern legacy, with other, ‘found’ sites discovered *en route*. These formed an imagined history of regional modernism, and were presented in a way that suggested them to be a series of previously undocumented ‘constructions’. Within the exhibition the boundaries between fact and fiction were blurred; archival and photographic ‘evidence’ supported the projection of an alternative modernity.

Qualified in such terms as the ground, the substratum, the footing, the ‘foundation’ could be understood to be a recurrent motif in the imagery of Photolanguage. The majority of the ‘foundation’ spaces we discuss here are, as objects of photographic attention, ‘found’ spaces that are, in effect, recovered through the act of recording. They are often ruins, left overs, the discarded, the misplaced; they are of a visual substratum. We would qualify these ‘ruins’ as foundation spaces because they are for us also *generative* as essential spaces of the urban ground; spaces of radical, negative accretion. The act of photographic documentation initiates for us an act of recuperation of such territories from a condition below the thresholds of vision, marginal to the economies of urban and architectural legibility, toward their reconfiguration as schematic sites and raw material for the construction of alternative, modern narratives.

Foundation Space 1: Plans for 'Front Line Improvements'

Between 1924 and 1930 the Hastings Borough Engineer's Office, led by Sidney Little, drew up plans for an extensive programme of 'Front Line Improvements' to the Hastings and St Leonards sea wall and beach front. Little's drawings for these improvements, now in the regional archives of The Keep in Brighton, provided for us a starting point for the description, illustration and reconceptualization of a journey across a series of modern topographies and spaces of foundation. Little's section drawings codify the dynamic space of confrontation between land and sea into a concise set of stable material properties, furnished with dimensions and succinct textual labels. He delineates the topographic boundaries of the 'beach line' and 'rock level', and instructs that piles are 'to be driven to rock level or other suitable foundations'. The new coastal wall, providing for a substantially widened promenade with car parking spaces beneath, is to be constructed in 'precast concrete' and 'basalt faced blocks', with 'reinforced counterfort frames'.

This would seem to anchor our journey in the most stable of foundation spaces: the designs of an engineer armouring the modern coastal town against nature's most persistent force of attrition. However, as spaces/ surfaces of signification the drawings are also characterized by elements of uncertainty, revision and embellishment. Alongside the resolved, modern scheme of improvement is an architecture and topography of amendment, of error and cancellation. The archive presents us, not simply with the final form of coastal defence, perfected and signed off, but with a certain level of working-out still in evidence, the marks of an imperfect process of proposal and adjustment, all indelibly inscribed in coloured ink. Even a section of the mighty sea wall has been 'cancelled'.

Figure 1. County Borough of Hastings: front line improvement, 1924 bill: cross sections of sea walls, by Sidney Little, Hastings Borough Engineer', 1930 (ref BOT/1/25129C) (detail).

Figure 2. County Borough of Hastings: front line improvement, 1924 bill: cross sections of sea walls, by Sidney Little, Hastings Borough Engineer', 1930 (ref BOT/1/25129C) (detail).

Figure 3. Cross section drawing of the rockery garden and its erroneous 'ghost'. County Borough of Hastings: front line improvement, 1924 bill: cross sections of sea walls, by Sidney Little, Hastings Borough Engineer', 1930 (ref BOT/1/25129C) (detail).

Although signed by the engineer and in the more technical format of the section, these drawings are certainly not the product of an artless hand and, as one closes in on the details of the scheme, one cannot help but take note of unexpected nuances in the deployment of Little's chosen media: the confident, inky curvatures of an arrow, the modulation in the strength and attitude of the hand-written typography; the aquatic quality of the gradients of green wash serving as the body colour of the masonry. The masonry sections have a subtle touch of Art Deco about them, a stylistic leaning which is confirmed in the detailing of the realized coastal architecture and furnishings of the seafront. There is, one might suggest, something of an aesthetic programme within the prescribed, technical format; a stylistic disposition and confidence subtly at work within the quite meagre diagrammatic limits of the section.

These effects of drawing error and expression exhibit their strongest effects within a detail of the surface of the redesigned promenade. Little indicates the placement of, what he labels, a 'Rock Garden', positioned on the landward side of the promenade, within the limits of the

existing sea wall. The outline of the rock garden is drawn in a cerise coloured ink, and the body of the form is coloured-in with a brown wash. An arrow is drawn in the same cerise ink to link the form to its annotation, which is written above in free-hand in black ink. It seems that cerise had been introduced as a result of a mistake and is the chosen colour of amendment, for next to the brown lump of the proposed rockery is, what might be described as, a ghost rockery, the beginnings of an initial attempt at the form positioned, it would seem, erroneously, a little too far to the south, to the seaward side. The outline of the ghost rockery is indicated by a series of lively marks in black ink, which have been crossed out in the cerise ink (small, neat crosses trace the erroneous outline, and also annul an arrow that linked the annotation to the abandoned, 'ghost rockery'). (See figure 3)

In our search through the available archive material relating to the work of Little and the modernist ambitions of the Borough Council, the rock garden detail immediately caught our attention as an incongruous, even obscene object, perched on the surface of the promenade. It appeared to us to be a different type of archival artefact, a different type of sign speaking from the past. Or, rather, this little knot of complexity seemed to speak to our present more directly, for, we immediately identified within it our desire to discover a different set of objects and signs that might evade the dominant narratives of this history of regional modernity, and to yield, and allow for the further invention of, alternative narratives.

The rockery protuberance seems a distinctly provisional presence, compared to the system of foundations, columns and peers on which it sits. An alternative or, rather, a deliberate misreading of the black marks of the adjacent 'ghost rockery' might ascribe to Little an intention to express the garden's vulnerability to onshore winds, as if the drawing were indicating future movement and change, anticipating the garden's future retreat by a metre or so. The drawing hand expresses itself very differently here. Unlike the drawing of the architecture of the proposed sea wall and subterranean car parks, this is not the ruled and measured drawing of design, but the speculative, approximate rendering of an indeterminate form. Whilst attempting to express and then amend a contrived formation of organic matter, Little also attempts to maintain graphic legibility, the integrity of the line, and he retains consistency with the colour coding of the drawing as a whole. The result is something akin to an ironic form, or even a comic one. As viewers to the Borough of Hastings archives, we could not help but read the form as a moment of unintended, scatological, seaside surrealism; the hand of the artistic engineer turned just a little rogue.

To unleash into the reading of the archive the notion of a 'rogue' element, the suggestion of an expression beyond the context of the artefact's intended professional production, a disturbance within its official discourse, is to, in effect, speculate on the presence of unconscious processes within the artefact's scheme of representation. Little's moment of 'rogue' drawing makes complex the codes of representation conceived to achieve the document's legibility and instruction: an ugly, ink-and-wash mound emerges from the revisions and approximations of an otherwise crisp, 'Deco'-inflected, modern engineer's drawing hand; a little monstrous presence formed at the intersection of error and expression. What then would be the meta-message or symbolic meaning of this figure of uncertainty?

I adopt the concept of 'figure' here from the work of the art theorist and semiotician Louis Marin, who has discussed the notion 'figurable latency' as a manifestation of unconscious motivations in painting and graphic art. Marin invokes, 'the figurable aspect of a painting, a

tension in the figure of the work in which something decisive may eventually play itself out'. (Marin, 1994: 58) Marin qualifies this as a form of index, trace or 'symptom' of a force or motivation otherwise unexpressed within the scheme of representation. These symptomatic figures are, for Marin, often inadvertent 'figures' of the shadows or margins. Marin gives the example of the presence of snakes within the classical landscapes of the painter Nicholas Poussin in which, in the 'shadows, at the foreground at left', a 'monstrous snake' strangles a man in an otherwise placid landscape. (Marin, 1994: 59) Marin clarifies that he is less interested in the snake as some manifest surfacing of the unconscious, traceable to a biographic detail through a process akin art history as psychoanalysis. Rather, he is interested in the complexity of signification which the presence of the snake brings to the composition of the surface of the painting itself and specifically in relation to the recurrent situating, in the left-hand corner of Poussin's paintings, of a zone of indeterminacy. 'Figural latency' concentrates, as Marin suggests, 'in the lower left corner of the foreground, which in Poussin's work is often the place of shadow, the place where earth and water mix, the place of anfractuosity, of the abyss – the place of the unbearable, precisely a place of latencies, of figural powers'. (Marin, 2001: 59)

Within the array of signifying elements of Little's drawing, the Rock Garden would seem to present the antithesis of the engineered foundation as the designed system of anchorage and connectivity. It is anti-architectural; anti-engineering. It is an indeterminate form which sits (and slides) atop the reinforced concrete of the Borough Council's 'front line improvements'. An unfixed figure, it 'plays'/ oscillates in the space between its ghost outline and its brown washed form. Less the 'anfractuosity' of the snake, Little's 'place of latency' contains the amorphous, imprecise delineation of a kind of excremental form. We might imagine, for example, how the 'rock garden' resembles a dump of spoil extracted from the pilings of the foundations themselves. As the space of the indeterminate within the drawing, Little as draftsman would seem to concentrate within the 'rock garden' an expression of that which falls outside of the discourse of professional mastery and control, the perfection of techniques, the delivery of the scheme. It is an expression of the other side of designed intention, and of the limits of the 'authority' and powers of the Borough to define its territories. It is, we might suggest, the anticipation of latent and unknown forces, both physical and historical that will define the scheme and its fate in both its construction and in its future use.

Foundation Space 2: The Sunken Gardens of Carlisle Parade, Hastings

The 'rock garden' as rogue detail, the diminutive figure of indeterminacy, was appropriated as an alternative point of origin or foundation for our journey through a regional, modern topography, moving from the space of the archive to the remaining, physical sites of Little's modernist legacy. The first of these sites was that of the realized 'rock gardens' themselves, to be found along Carlisle Parade, a central section of the Hastings and St Leonards seafront.

In the final scheme for the rock gardens the Borough opted for a 'sunken garden' solution for the rockery, further amending the scheme shown in the drawings of the late 1920s and early 30s, to address precisely the rock gardens' exposed situation. There are three stretches of sunken garden, approximately two metres lower than the surface of the Parade at their lowest point. The gardens are edged on the southern side by an Art Deco detailed, crenelated, concrete wall to provide extra protection from on-shore winds. Within the gardens a central

concrete path divides deep planting borders to either side. Between them, on the surface of the Parade, are three concrete shelters, also dating from the 1930s.

Figure 4. Postcard of the Sunken Rock Gardens of Carlisle Parade, circa 1935

Figure 5. *Carlisle Parade*, Photolanguage (Nigel Green & Robin Wilson), 2016

Figure 6. *Sunken Garden, Coastal Type I, Carlisle Parade*, Photolanguage (Nigel Green & Robin Wilson), 2016

These sunken gardens could be said to be a model of modernist street planning of this type. Their sunken topography offers shelter and a micro climate for plantation. But they also serve to signal the larger topographic and subterranean features of the engineer Little's coastal infrastructure. For, in the realized scheme they now sit atop subterranean car parks and a pedestrian underpass which take beach goers from the town centre to their destination below the level of the main coastal road. The concrete shelters are also complex figures of negotiation between the surface and the subterranean spaces of the town at these sites. Functionally they are hybrid, being small urban pavilions. One doubles as a bus shelter and their cores are hollow, to provide ventilation shafts for the car park below.

Vintage postcards record how the borders of the sunken gardens were once planted with an abundance of miniature, alpine species, artfully arranged across a complex, rockery topography – a meticulous, botanical contrivance clearly invested with much labour. The post cards also record the smartly-dressed citizens of 1930s Hastings reposing on benches within this sunken terrain: a couple engage in conversation; a man in an over coat, with head supported on hand, sits alone in a posture of repose and contemplation; a mother and child enjoy a patch of sun. Whilst the mother focuses on something on her lap – perhaps knitting – the child looks in our direction, that is, in the direction of the viewer, the camera: a curious and carefree glance up from the protective confines of the mother, from the sheltered conditions of the sunken garden, from the centre of this scene of social and public order. Similar figures repose on the bench of the concrete shelter beyond, at promenade level: on one side, four women sit in a row, cross-legged, relaxed in their proximity; to the other, another single man aligns his posture to the 45-degree angle of the protective, glazed, side-fins of the pavilion to immerse himself in a book. Beyond this foreground of happy and harmonious occupation of the diligently prepared modern, urban topography, the image captures a portion of the more densely occupied southern side of the Parade, with a dark mass of figures converging toward the White Rock Pavilion.

In current times, the sunken gardens no longer represent the same kind of common resource to be politely enjoyed and shared. The gardens now seem to represent a troublesome half level between the surface and the still useful substratum; a topographic irregularity and something of a maintenance problem. The old rockery stones are visible in places, but the meticulously constructed landscape has been largely covered over with a gradual build-up of earth and dust, so that it appears that current gardening activity now takes place on top of partly uncovered archaeological remains. The micro botany of the rockery alpine scheme has also disappeared, and in its place is a mix of larger, common garden shrubs interspersed with

‘exotics’. There is a ragged collection of seaside palms, broom and variegated grasses; giant agaves have been brutally hacked back at the base and ivy spreads. Across some sections a species of creeping ground cover succulent is prolific – a thick mat of spongy, vegetal matter, perhaps a remainder from the hey-day of rockery spectacle, becoming dominant over an eighty-year process of natural selection. In other zones, the ground is barren and compacted, as if the gardens have experienced micro events of desertification. Few visit these spaces now, and those who do go there in order to pass time in a protected space out of sight, to withdraw from the raw winds and the common gaze.

Whilst the final design of the rock gardens mitigated against the exposure of their initial positioning on the surface of the promenade, they have nevertheless fallen subject to an erosive process of historical change. One might suggest that the indeterminacy of the original drawn, cross-section ‘figure’ is borne out in the present state of the gardens, which would seem equally to express the limits of design intention and of the Borough Council’s power to control the material condition of its territories.

However, this rather unevenly maintained, partly ‘naturalized’ condition of the once carefully planned and tended municipal plantation could also be said to have a specific aesthetic value, for it represents an authentic expression of the fate of the modernist space in the contemporary era. The armature of Little’s modern design remains, but the finesse and full aesthetic intention of that modern culture, the completeness of its gardening expression, has fallen away and is now lost, not only materially, but largely erased from the cultural consciousness. It is no longer feasible within the practices of financing and maintenance of public space; and it is no longer representative of the way we perceive, occupy and share public ground or civic space. The sunken gardens’ protective micro climate no longer supports a specialized botany for the enjoyment of the dominant, social milieu. They are now distinctly more liminal spaces, subject only to minimal maintenance and characterized as much by a process of *negative accretion* as by design.

As we travelled across the remains of this history of regional modernity, the condition of the ‘sunken’ now informed a modified conception of the foundation narrative to be fulfilled / discovered. If the ‘rock garden’ drawing represents a place of latency in Little’s expression of professional discourse of ‘front line improvement’, the ‘sunken’ now represented for us spaces in which a process of negative accretion (abandonment, ruination and the accumulation of the unwanted) generates a space possessing material conditions for whom ‘no one’ is directly responsible.

Foundation Space 3: ‘The Sunken Garden of Mulberry Prospect’ (Littlestone).

During World War 2 Sidney Little’s expertise in reinforced concrete was put to use by the Admiralty, and he contributed to the design and development of the floating Mulberry Harbours used in the deployment of Allied forces to Northern France after the D-Day Landings of June 1944. A section of one of the components of a Mulberry harbour, a Phoenix Caisson breakwater, lies beached off the coast at Littlestone, a few miles beyond the eastern border of East Sussex into Kent.

In marked contrast to the Todt company’s concrete bunkers of the Nazi’s Atlantic Wall subsiding in the sands on the other side of the Channel, this artefact of concrete’s modern military history forms a perfect datum line with the horizon: an as yet unexploited offshore

foundation. We tracked across half a mile of low tide beach to gain different photographic vantage points, a different perspective onto the frontal view of this fragment of concrete horizon. To the eye, the view seemed infinitely variable; to the camera a single image was suffice. We had thoughts of getting nearer but paid heed to rumours about the instability of the more distant mudflats and the presence of sinkholes.

On our return to firmer ground on the coastal road, we discovered at the corner of Grand Parade and Queen's Road, the ruins of the footings of a sea front house and its garden plot. Here, the paucity of the photographic referent encountered on the beach was contrasted with an abundance of interest. This was a complex, multi-levelled terrain of concrete, brick and fragments of ceramic tile; a stepped, tiered and zoned surface with glimpses down to inaccessible voids. It suggested a scale model of an urban plan, like an imagined Sidney Little scheme for an 'ideal', multi-levelled Littlestone. Equally, the abandoned footings, forming a low-lying, protective perimeter to the site, functioned like a vast urban planter, replicating the conditions of a sunken garden. In the variation of topography and opportunities for plant colonization within it, and because of the absence of maintenance, the site supports a considerably richer diversity of plant life than the gardens of Carlisle Parade. Here we encountered a dramatic mix of domestic garden and wilder common weed and maritime species, and the combination of both living and dead vegetal forms. The site presented a species richness as a garden of intersection between land and sea, the domestic and the wild, with juxtapositions of scale, the barren and the effulgent. There were zones where single species are expressed sparsely like specimens in a botanical garden; and others where dense, multi-species thickets had evolved. As the plot was in sight of the Mulberry Harbour we named it the 'Sunken Garden of Mulberry Prospect'.

Figure 7. *Sunken and Concealed Forms, Mulberry Harbour, Littlestone*, Photolanguage (Nigel Green & Robin Wilson), 2016

Figure 8. *Sunken Garden, Coastal Type II, Littlestone*, Photolanguage (Nigel Green & Robin Wilson), 2016

Figure 9. *Simple Pruning 1930: Fieldwork Preparations at Mulberry Prospect*, Photolanguage (Nigel Green & Robin Wilson), 2016

Figure 10. Installation of archival assemblages by Photolanguage, *East Sussex Modern*, 2016

Such ruptures in the order of the built environment inevitably prompt speculation as to their cause. Perhaps, like the fragment of Mulberry Harbour itself, this ruin was a left-over from the war, the result of a Luftwaffe bomber jettisoning its remaining payload before taking flight across the Channel. But why would a bomb site not yet have been redeveloped?

The ruin also prompted a memory of the catastrophic destruction of a house in a work of science fiction, set in its early stages in the small town of Lympne, just a few miles up the coast, beyond Dymchurch. There, H.G. Wells's rogue scientist, Cavor, conducted furnace-based experiments in his house with the aim of producing a substance 'opaque' to 'gravitational attraction', and necessary for his designs for lunar travel. (Wells, 1926: 19) The substance was discovered as a result of neglect of the furnace by one of his assistants, and the birth of what was to be called 'Cavorite', as a rogue product of the foundry, took the form of

a violent and radical explosion. In seconds the house had been turned inside out, ripped from its connection to the earth, subject to a screaming release of anti-gravity. Well's narrator, Mr Bedford, describes, 'In that instant the whole face of the world had changed. The tranquil sunset had vanished, the sky was dark with scurrying clouds, everything was flattened and swaying with the gale'. (Wells, 1926: 26) We might note that, for Wells, the moment of radical discovery, the birth of space travel, meant the ruination of Earthly property, the obliteration of the home, and the negation of the ground as the datum of architectural stability.ⁱⁱ

Nothing quite so momentous emerges from our documentation and fictional musings on the ruins of Mulberry Prospect. However, in defining it as a 'prospect' it was, like Cavor's ruined house, a foundation space of projection within our itinerary of modern travel, the launch pad of visions out. The concluding section to follow offers some reflections on the meaning of our imaging and re-imagining of the significance of this site.

Foundation narratives and a dialectic assemblage.

The site of Mulberry Prospect was presented within the exhibition *East Sussex Modern* as a series of photographs and a partly fabricated archival artefact. The artefact was entitled: *Simple Pruning 1930: Fieldwork Preparations at Mulberry Prospect*. (See figure 9.) The underlying support of this work was an authentic artefact of Sidney Little's time: a 1930 first edition of N. Catchpole's gardening handbook *Simple Pruning*. The book was presented open at a page showing two illustrations for root pruning, with the specimen presented against a blank surface and its bare roots exposed. The left-hand page was replaced by a fabricated page: two photos from Photolanguage's documentation at Littlestone, one of the prospect garden and the other a sea view of the distant Mulberry Harbour, were printed on a blank page cut from the rear of the book. These were provided with the caption, 'Sunken and concealed forms: plantations at Mulberry Prospect'. The underside of the book's tattered outer dust sheet was also folded open, left visible to either side, and used for further interventions. These took the form of a hand-written list of plant species taken from the planting lists at the back of Catchpole's book and, on the other side, a pencil sketch which replicated Sidney Little's pen and ink drawings of the rock garden at Carlisle Parade, including the annotation 'Existing sea wall'.

The narrative suggested by our assemblage was thus that this was a copy of the book belonging to Little, or to one of his associates, and that it provided evidence for the inclusion of this site as part of a network of affiliated modern sites and sunken gardens. However, the intention was not to fabricate to the extent of tricking exhibition viewers into belief about a false history, but rather, to entice viewers to hover productively between fact and fiction, evidence and associative fantasy. The exhibition included ample clues to decode the artefact in this sense. The two photographs inserted within the book were also reproduced as a part of a series of conventionally presented, larger, photographic prints hung on the walls of the gallery, thus allowing viewers to discover the status of the archival fabrication.

In returning to this piece it now seems apparent that the function of the work of assemblage and intervention into the 1930s book was precisely to bring the image of the distant harbour fragment and the ruined house and garden plot into proximity and into a kind of dialectic relationship. The 'Sunken Garden of Mulberry Prospect' is, in effect, not the singular site of the abandoned plot and its botanical life, but is the combination of the two ruins at

Littlestone, these two ‘latent foundations’. In ascribing meaning to this assemblage and dialectic relationship it would seem appropriate to address the way this work philosophizes about local and specific conceptions of modern history (Little’s legacy and our contemporary engagement with it – our starting ‘brief’), but also to address ways in which the work might ‘figure’ more universal questions of modernity encoded in the work and, indeed, to address the contemporary context (the times in which we currently operate and ultimately make works about). For the former, this would mean a more-or-less explicit reflection on modernist aesthetics, our relationship to specific examples of cultural production of the recent past. For the latter, we must delve a little deeper and more speculatively into the possibility of an allegorical reading, to consider what Fredric Jameson might term, the work’s ‘political unconscious’. (We are mindful, however, that Jameson’s challenge to ‘unmask the cultural artefact as a social symbolic act’ and to determine its latent ideological coordinates is perhaps not best performed by the authors of the work in question). (Jameson 2002: 5)

A first reading emerging from the explicit aesthetic and conceptual concerns of the practice of Photolanguage might see in this work the recording of a modern, local, material history overlaid, or surcharged, by a set of aesthetic practices, photographic and curatorial strategies and knowledges that record and present these physical artefacts of local modern history, but which also transform and re situate them. While on one level our practice of representation indulges in a fictional reimagining of the modernist practice of Sidney Little as a specific author/ creator of infrastructure and public places, it also utilizes the quest to discover ‘lost’ sunken gardens as an opportunity to find appropriate sites through which to reflect on the primary medium of the practice of Photolanguage: photography itself. The terms of the dialectic assemblage of Mulberry Prospect would, in this sense, range from, on the one hand, a mode of photography which gravitates toward a fugitive or diffuse referent, prioritizing variable atmospheric phenomena in order to explore, in a more abstract manner, the potentialities and limits of the photographic medium as a visioning technology; to, on the other hand, the medium of photography as the recorder of the object and terrain in all its specific, material complexity. We might furnish this with examples: On one side of the dialectic, in the view out to sea, an inference is forged to the work of photographers such as Hiroshi Sugimoto, such as his long exposure images of cinema screens in the series *Theatres* (1978-) and, indeed, of *Seascapes* (1980-), or, in a yet more abstract sense, to works such as Frank van der Salm’s *Focus* (2003). (Baltzer, 2004: 71) On the other side of the dialectic, in the images of the ‘sunken garden’, a clear relationship is established to key works of the New Topographics group, in particular the work of Lewis Baltz in *Candlestick Point* (1989).ⁱⁱⁱ The garden images also forge an association with earlier practices of recording found objects within surrealist-affiliated photographic practice, such as the use of photography in the work of artist Paul Nash operating in the very same locations of Southern England in the 1920s to the 1940s, or the recording of bomb damage sites by photographers such as Cecil Beaton and Lee Miller during World War II.

Contained within this dialectic between styles and the structuring of the photographic referent within a recent history of photographic practice is a yet more obvious, spatial dialectic, between distance and the near-at-hand, between the open expanse of the sea, on the one hand, and enclosed space on the other. This spatial dialectic presents a combination of two fundamental categories of modern space: the image of the horizon and of the enclosed space of ordered nature, the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden.

The formation of a spatial dialectic in *Simple Pruning 1930: Fieldwork Preparations at Mulberry Prospect* might be productively compared with an image from the dawn of our modernity in the Sainsbury Wing collection of the British National Gallery, 'The Virgin and Child ("Madonna with the Iris")', Workshop of Albrecht Durer. Here a striking combination of horizon and enclosed space are combined within the same image. The Madonna and child inhabit a verdant garden, and are set within a masonry wall and temporary wooden framework, which itself seems to occupy an ambiguous status between ruin and on-going construction. The substantial, yet irregular, outer wall of the garden frames a view onto a particular presentation of distance. Painted around 1500-10, the horizon line visible through the masonry frame would seem to be charged with news of new discoveries and their cosmic implications. It is a horizon figured soon after the discovery of the New World, and seems to be imbued with a sense of infinite expansion.

As Louis Marin has explained, the meaning of the word horizon has itself mutated across the history of Western modernity. (Marin, 1993, 406-08) While the 'Madonna with the Iris' would seem to register an almost immediate response to the depiction of the horizon within Renaissance visual culture after the discovery of the Americas, Marin points out that it was not until the 18th century that dictionary definitions designated to the word horizon a notion of infinity. Before that period, horizon designated, paradoxically, a space *with* limits, the limits of the gaze and a bounded space. Marin cites a passage from Victor Hugo to evidence this changing conception of modern spatial limits within the Romantic period, in which Hugo states, 'The modern ideal is not the pure and correct line, but the blossoming of the universal horizon'. (Marin, 1993: 407)

Therefore, in a final reflection we might ask: What is the nature and possible meaning of the horizon figured in the Photolanguage image of Mulberry prospect, in the view out to sea toward the beached fragment of the Mulberry harbour? And how might the relationship between it and the imagery made within the ruin on the corner of Grand Parade and Queen's Road (our *hortus conclusus*) be formulated? If these are two foundation spaces that support an allegorical formulation of our British modernity, what might they communicate?

As we travelled across the legacy of East Sussex and Kentish modernity we were also travelling through the contemporary political landscapes of towns and regions that were divided almost fifty-fifty in their attitudes to the outside, to limits, boundaries and horizons. It now seems difficult not to read into the image construct of Mulberry Prospect an allegorical inflection of the long shadow of Brexit divisions, and the sense of closure that has descended, the imposition of a set of psychic and soon to be legal restrictions and prohibitions imposed by the slim victory of one half of the population on another. Out to sea, the mobile harbour, architectonic agent of the liberation of Europe in mid-century, becomes here the figure of a new boundary between neighbours and allies. A line is inserted which interrupts 'the blossoming' of Hugo's utopian modernity of the 'universal horizon'. The Phoenix Caisson Breakwater of Sidney Little et al. now redefines the infinite horizon as one with a definite edge, the limit to a bounded space.

The question thus remains as to what responds to / dialogues with this image of closure or contraction? One perhaps might read into Photolanguage's photographic record of the enclosed space, the sunken garden, a nostalgia for a radical form of Romantic / Picturesque image within a certain lineage of modern and post-modern photographic practices. By

invoking a certain memory of / resonance with practices such as those of Nash, Beaton and Baltz, we could be said to have trapped ourselves within the force-field of a once radical, modernist trajectory of image-making which is now, in fact, definitively concluded, no longer possible to continue with productively (an exhausted aesthetic). However, we would claim that there is a strategic differentiation in this work that evades such a fate, for the presentation of the photography of Mulberry prospect garden responds to both local and universal modern themes. It is generated from an engagement with the archival and actual remains of the urban designs of Little, as well as the legacy of photographic practice. It is a regionally specific application of this matrix of imaging strategies.

While the Mulberry prospect ruin offers a thorough and fascinating corruption of the urban and architectural by the ‘natural’ – offering an ideal site in which to perform a photography of the found terrain in a modern picturesque/ New Topographics mode – to fixate only on the formal properties of such a space and present the photographs alone would, indeed, be to enter into aesthetic impasse, to be aesthetically cornered.^{iv} The fuller implication of *Simple Pruning 1930: Fieldwork Preparations at Mulberry Prospect* as a faux, archival construct is, however, to engage with such spaces for their inherent qualities of indeterminacy, as spaces in which the established codes of local urban order, architectural and social identity are suspended, reduced to the essential conditions of the ground. As such, and as latent spaces of foundation, the purpose of the work was to offer a margin of freedom for a work of imaginative reconceptualization to be expressed and shared, in the presentation of a space where alternative narratives might take root, where the fictional embellishment of real histories might be projected. This enticement to reverie within the ‘garden’, to revise, to rethink and reimagine the regional modern history, is not merely constructed for the purposes of the idle day dream, but is critically proposed as a reflection on history itself: as a reminder that all history is apprehended as narrative, and in the imagination of alternative histories we might grasp the arbitrary nature of the present through which we pass, and thus reaffirm the possibility of historical *intervention*, of actively modifying our own futures.

References

- Baltzer, Nanni (2004) ‘Photographing Architecture: Capturing the Impalpable’, *L’Architecture D’Aujourd’hui*, 354 (September-October), pp. 68-71.
- Green, N. and Wilson, R. (2016) *Journeys in a Modern Topography*, Saint-Omer: Éditions les Venterniers.
- Hughes, Rolf (2006) ‘The Poetics of Practice Based Research’, *The Journal of Architecture*, 11:3, pp. 283-301.
- Jameson, Fredric (2001) *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Macarthur, John (2007), *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and Other Irregularities*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Marin, Louis (1993) ‘Frontiers of Utopia: Past and Present’, *Critical Inquiry*, 19, (Winter), pp. 397-420.

Marin, Louis (2001) 'The Concept of Figurability, or the Encounter Between Art History and Psychoanalysis', in Hamacher, W. and Wellbery, D.E, *On Representation: Louis Marin*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 54-63.

Pollard, Richard (2011) *Hastings: Looking Back to the Future, A Tribute to Sidney Little*, Hastings: Richpenbooks.

Wells, H.G. (1926) *The First Men in the Moon*, London: Essex Edition, Vol. VIII.

Dr Robin Wilson is a lecturer in the History and Theory Department of the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. He is author of *Image, Text, Architecture: The Utopics of the Architectural Media* (Routledge, 2015).

Photolanguage (Nigel Green & Robin Wilson) was established in 1998, as a collaboration exploring the legacy of modernism through diverse techniques of imaging, text and the found artefact. They have exhibited in venues such as the Museum of Fine Art, Calais, the Museum of Garden History, London, and the Museum of the Sketch, Lund and the Mediathèque of the French Institute, London. See, Photolanguage.info

ⁱ The exhibition *East Sussex Modern* was shown in the Electro Studios Project Space, 8-23 October, 2016. The studios are adjacent to the site of the destroyed St Leonard's Lido. It also included the work of artist Colin Booth, it was project managed by Christine Gist and funded by Arts Council England and The Elephant Trust.

ⁱⁱ Littlestone is, in fact, the site of Mr Bedford's return to Earth at the conclusion of Well's novel.

ⁱⁱⁱ The critic Andrew Mead explores the relationship between the work of Photolanguage and the work of Baltz in his essay "Unconsidered Ground" within the exhibition catalogue *Journeys in a Modern Topography*.

^{iv} For an in-depth discussion of the role of the Picturesque in modernist imaging and spatial practices see the work of the architecture and art theorist John Macarthur.