Hi all. Before we left, David asked me to write down my take-aways on the built and unbuilt environment of Pripyat - many apologies for how late this is.

Firstly, thank you all so much for making the trip such a fascinating one. I feel honoured and excited to have been present at a conference with such a wealth of highly regarded experts in their fields and I think the experience was a triumph of transdiscipline.

Human Geography is a very interesting lens through which to examine Chernobyl; I think that was evident in Nadia’s presentation. If you remember studying ‘human geography’ at school, you probably remember colour-coded maps and really banal sentences like ‘People live in cities’. At an academic level, I find human geography very exciting because it’s actually so broad; as my supervisor reminded me on the first day of my PhD, ‘everything happens somewhere’; her argument was that everything, then, can be Human Geography. So we have a lot of subdisciplines. Some of them are the ones you expect - geographies of conflict, that sort of thing - and then there are the slightly more outlandish ones (I’m sure some of our group would have been interested to sit in on some of the ‘geographies of beer’ papers submitted to the American Association of Geographers conference this year). My own subdiscipline is carceral geography - the geography of incarceration. That, however, was really just an ‘in’ to writing about what I love, which is architecture. So under the ‘carceral geography’ umbrella, I use cultural geography, geographies of architecture and geographies of emotion, under which comes (and yes, perhaps this is getting ridiculous) ‘geographies of enthusiasm’.

Another thing that human geographers tend to be unafraid of is interdisciplinary reading. In a young field like carceral geography, which has been pioneered by my supervisor Dominique Moran, it is vital to look to other disciplines in order to produce rich and accurate work. In carceral geography, we understandably regularly look to Criminology and there is a growing discourse between the two subjects. In my own PhD, I frequently borrow from critical criminology, History of Design, Architectural Theory, Sociology and the (now slightly unfashionable) field of Environmental Psychology.

I was truly excited to receive an email asking if anyone in our department would like to visit Chernobyl on this trip, but I did have to think about how my field of expertise would fit in. In fact, I had not anticipated the parallels that I would draw with my own work on architecture when we visited Pripyat.

Before visiting, my initial questions involved NIMBYism - the ‘Not In My Back Yard’ phenomenon which is talked about frequently when LULU (Locally Unwanted Land Use) facilities are proposed in the UK and North America. I wondered whether or not the Chernobyl disaster had significantly altered levels of NIMBYism towards nuclear power facilities worldwide. I was delighted when both Eamonn and Phil addressed the queries that I’d had in their presentations - and surprised me by dispelling, certainly in part, what I’d originally thought.
During our tour of Chernobyl and Pripyat however, I saw two very strong links to my own work. One particularly relevant aspect of architectural geography is the concept of ‘big things’. The notion of ‘big things’ came about in architectural geography when buildings began to be seen less as objects and more as ‘performances’. They are identified and concentrated upon by many cultural geographers, and a list of them is drawn together by Rose et al (2010), who state that in geography, big things are not simply defined as large buildings. The ‘big thing’ that is focussed on is the way in which these buildings come to be and are experienced once they are; the actors that make up the building are crucial when defining it as a ‘big thing’. Rose et al take into account geographies of emotion and geographies of affect, noting that ‘big things’ may exist within both strands. Their list, compiled of a series of buildings referred to as ‘big things’ by other geographers, is as follows: residential tower blocks, airports, skyscrapers, shopping malls, office blocks, flyovers, plazas, libraries and even ships. Moran et al (2015) go on to add prisons to this list; schools, universities and hospitals would also fit snugly on there. Scanning the list, we see plenty of the buildings we visited in Pripyat on there; in fact, I am beginning to wonder whether Pripyat itself, as a closed space, may be classed as a big thing in its entirety. I spoke to my supervisor Peter Kraftl, an architectural geographer, about this and he thinks it is an interesting avenue for further inquiry.

In the 1980s, Mona Domosh was the first geographer to explore the social meaning inscribed into built structures. Domosh (1989) revealed that the skyscrapers of 1930s New York were, in part, as had been previously understood, a response to a need for more office space in a small area; but she contested the idea that this was their sole purpose. Domosh revealed that the skyscrapers had not been built at the point of maximum land value, and that as such, they served as ‘material expressions of social legitimacy and economic power for New York’s nouveau riche class’ (1989: 352). The original meanings inscribed into the structures of Pripyat were simple. A Soviet city built expressly for the families of those hard at work on the plant, Pripyat was a carefully constructed vision of socialist utopia. We saw this in the beautiful stained glass in the restaurant; the murals in the Palace of Culture; the spectacular views from the windows of compact but efficiently designed apartments.

‘Big things’, Rose et al argue, are not just buildings; they require discourse - ‘everyday routines, condensation, conversation’ (2010 : 334) in order to be understood. When this conversation happens, it makes them, according to Rose et al, ‘a building event’ (2010 : 335). By this logic, as generally buildings must be existed within and around, negotiated and navigated, in order to be, it makes sense that Rose et al go on to describe the city as a ‘rhythmic force-field of encounters and practices’ (338). But what happens when the city is abandoned? The way in which it is navigated changes entirely, particularly now that there is a perception of ‘danger’ attached to Pripyat. Now seen predominantly onscreen and on guided tours, Pripyat’s meaning has shifted immeasurably from what was intended into something unique. As it stands, uninhabited and crumbling, it is no longer party to the regular rhythms of the city; and yet it has not been entirely stripped of the ‘encounters and practices’ Rose’s city requires. Jacobs and Merriman (2011) explore what they refer to as ‘practising architecture’. According to them, there are ‘practitioners’ of architecture - from the architect, to the builders, to the inhabitans - but also including cleaners, and even
vandals. They then push the concept of ‘architectural practitioners’ even further, questioning whether or not pets can be included; and if pets, then rodents, too; and if rodents, then why not the things that make up and essentially define the construct itself; ‘supporting, sealing, joining, weathering, peeling, rusting’ (211)? They even identify mould and mosses as architectural practitioners. There may be a tendency to look at the abandoned city as ‘dead’ - but if we marry Rose’s theory of the city’s force-field of rhythms to Jacobs and Merriman’s theories of non-human architectural practitioners, we see Pripyat as a living city, still; it’s architectural meaning makers simply differ from those usually at work.

Kraftl talks about affect in architecture in a 2010 paper, saying that ‘affective states may be created by architects… (but) the precise effects of these rather generic design frames… are the unpredictable ongoing result of how people are using, moving through, maintaining, refurbishing, adorning and interpreting architectural spaces’ (Kraftl, 2010: 408). In my own work I draw heavily from this, looking at the layers of meaning bestowed upon buildings, and upon the city itself. Pripyat and Chernobyl are perfect places to look at layers of meaning. We were told on our tourbus, for example, that Chernobyl was ancient - an 11th Century village. We heard it had an historic Jewish population. We heard about, and met, the samosely, the people who felt such an acute sense of belonging to the place that they returned. Yet the first time many people heard of Chernobyl was in 1986. The 11th Century village, the Jewish town, the quiet home of Ukraine’s nuclear industry; these are all part of Chernobyl’s multi-layered existence.

As I previously noted, Pripyat was the brand new poster city for a socialist ideal. The youth of the city is another layer. To me, the young vibrancy of the new city could still tragically be felt as we walked the streets there, like a young person, cut down too soon; add to that the meaning makers that writhe through it - rust, decay, rampant weeds and wildlife, wolves - all things that in a post-horror movie, post-dystopian fiction society, we associate with apocalypse. For some, those who have played the warfare based video game Call of Duty, Pripyat is lent a dystopian hyperreality, as it is used as a set in the game.

There are still further layers. Our tour company, for example, has capitalised on a blossoming tourist industry in Chernobyl; and it is safe to say that had the accident never happened, most people who visit now would not have done. And perhaps this is a good point to acknowledge that conceptions of utopia are subjective - as Chris explained to us, endangered wildlife has proliferated in the area, and in that way, Chernobyl has become utopian again.

Bibliography


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