A READING OF AN ATLANTIC TERRITORY IN GALICIA

Elisa Gallego Picard

FOREWORD
Stone and water versus reeds and mud

"I humbly extend to the public a series of works that came into being within the contemplation of great objects in Nature, upon the ocean, in the forests of the Orinoco, in the steppes of Venezuela, in the wilderness of the Peruvian and Mexican mountains [...] A far-reaching overview of Nature, proof of the cooperation of forces, and a renewal of the delight that direct experience of the tropics gives to a person of feeling are the goals to which I strive."
Alexander von Humboldt[1]

This publication sets us a challenge: to read a territory. Through text, photographs and drawings, it invites us to discover and deconstruct the various components and elements and so better understand this Atlantic territorial palimpsest in analytical, critical and emotional terms. Its author, Elisa Gallego, meticulously retraces its maps and accompanies them with insights into the views and concepts that complement the territory and landscape to help us comprehend the interaction between the seen and the unseen and the relationship between observer and inhabitant. It is worth mentioning that this in-depth study is a distillation of the homonymous doctoral thesis – defended over five years ago – that earned such accolades as the 2019 Extraordinary Award for a Doctoral Thesis and the 2023 Manuel de Solà-Morales European Award for the best doctoral thesis on land-use planning. I use the term 'distillation' because, as is typical of all research, the passage of time has led the author to rewrite the text and provide new images and cartographies. A prime example of this new material is the toponymic map, which takes a highly critical look at the territory's future in light of the transformations and threats it faces: wildfires, energy industries, wind and fish farming, tourism industry and more.

I vividly recall the inception of this doctoral thesis as I sat with the author and her father, Manuel, on a terrace in the canton of Ribadeo one summer afternoon. Supervising Elisa Gallego's research has been one of the greatest satisfactions of my final years in academia, a period not always fully understood within my professional circle. One of my primary concerns has been to comprehensively analyse the territory from both the architectural and critical perspectives, drawing on William Morris's definition of architecture[2] – frequently cited in my lectures – and concentrating

1. Alexander VON HUMBOLDT: Foreword to *Ansichten der Natur: Mit wissenschaftlichen Erläuterungen* [Views of Nature], Tubinga, 1808.

2. "[...] because architecture is the set of modifications and alterations made in the earth's surface [...]", in William MORRIS: "The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization", lecture given in London, 1881, published in *Hopes and Fear for Art*, New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1905.

on so-called 'minor architecture'. I must stress that this volume contains only a selection of the original graphic documents, which comprised both maps and architectural drawings. I would therefore encourage anyone interested in this text to explore them in full in the original thesis and to immerse themselves in the 10-minute video that provides an overview of this territory. The analytical methodology employed in this study, which combines both the scientific and the emotion-based approaches, provides not only descriptive and historical analyses but also explores the meaning and symbolism associated with them. It incorporates sources and documents that address aspects both material and intangible, visible and unseen, thus serving as a guide for future researchers exploring our territories.

The chosen territory is tied to the author's childhood landscapes, situated between two *rías* – Cee y Corcubión and Muros y Noia – and defined by the sea and the imposing bodies of Mount Pindo and Mount Louro. Elisa Gallego's sentimental gaze is informed by her earlier studies of the built heritage of this Atlantic region, drawing on their descriptive, historical and symbolic analyses to deepen our awareness and understanding of the environment and its people. These examinations fully acknowledge the roles imagination, magic and myth play in the interaction between humans and territory. The myth of Celtic origins traceable back to the La Tène culture of the Second Iron Age is naturally ever-present and roots the contemporary Galician worldview, as manifested in their Celtic music or the football club Celta de Vigo. Although contemporary Galician archaeologists advocate replacing this cultural reference with the term *castreño*, José Varea y Aguiar's romantic invention of 1838,[3] taken up by numerous authors and elaborated upon in the influential work published by López Cuevillas in the mid-20th century,[4] has gained wide currency. These origins, however, have yet to be confirmed by archaeological data, which to date refutes claims of Galicia's occupation by the Celts. Rather, the proto-Celtic *castreño* habitat is categorised under what Danish archaeologist Kristiansen defines as "Atlantic culture", which Gallego acknowledges in the foreword to her cartographic series.

From a more recent perspective, the critical approach to this territory's transformation in the 20th and 21st centuries is given particular importance in the text, supported by recent images that, when juxtaposed with older ones, deepen our understanding of the changes. This brings to mind some of the transformations I myself have witnessed on Galicia's northern coast – an area I have enjoyed visiting for family reasons since the 1960s – among them the practical disappearance of sand-hoppers due to summer tourist pressure on the beaches and the reduction in seaweed. I recall how throughout that decade and the next we used to catch bucketloads of these tiny crustacean at sunset in the trenches running parallel to the sea to use as fishing bait. Those evenings at low tide, accompanied by the ever-present reek of seaweed, evoked something unique and profound – distinct from the sensation created by the Mediterranean shore – albeit today as rare to experience as swimming through forests of Laminaria, a thrilling feeling accessible now only in my memories. The disappearance of marine species, as documented by biologists and ecologists, as well as the warming of the waters, is another symptom of the transformations brought to these northern territories by climate change, over-fishing and anthropic pressure, to which must be added the alterations made to the terrestrial landscape.

I write these lines in the wake of the tragedy wrought by the torrential downpours in Valencia, where the tally of victims numbers more than two hundred. I cannot

3. José VEREA Y AGUIAR: *Historia de Galicia. Primera parte, que comprende los orígenes y estado de los pueblos septentrionales y occidentales de la España antes de su conquista de los romanos*, El Ferrol, 1838.

4. Florentino LÓPEZ CUEVILLAS: *La civilización céltica en Galicia*, Santiago de Compostela: Porto y Cía., 1953.

erase from my mind the images of divers searching for the missing among the reedbeds and muddied waters of the *albufera*. What mastery author Blasco Ibáñez demonstrated in encapsulating in the title of a novel – *Cañas y barro* – the reeds and mud that define the landscape and territory where its characters struggles take place. They contrast starkly with the stone and water that the author of this thesis presents as bearers of meaning in her reading of the Iberian Peninsula's Atlantic coast. The tragedy in Valencia arouses an indignation shared with the region's inhabitants at the way the authorities handled the disaster, in which disdain and climate denial were compounded by incompetence. We cannot overlook the fact that from the second half of the 20th century onwards, the riverbanks and floodplains of this and many other Mediterranean territories have been altered. The built environment has encroached on gullies and thalwegs and spread across fertile plains and farmland. The dry ravines, in their current urban context, become man-made channels that cause destructive power when they overflow. In this brutal transformation of the landscape, largely dictated by tourism, recent development is joined by new transport infrastructure that casually erects a barrier on the road network and in the waterless ravines. These impacts all stem from the legislative changes of the 1990s, which allowed non-development land to be rezoned as greenfield plots, meaning permission to build was granted freely and local authorities stopped viewing housing as meeting a social need and started seeing it as an investment. This shift towards homes becoming tradable goods ripe for speculation is still seen as socially acceptable under a worldview that mistakenly believes that the way to lower house prices is to rezone every available square metre as land for development. For decades, government has dispensed with any form of social rental policy, while so-called 'holiday lets' have turned vast numbers of empty dwellings into exemplars of speculative investment.

Reading the territory, thinking and acting with the aim of promoting the health and well-being of its inhabitants, caring for the environment, learning from past experience and the wisdom of our elders, rejecting climate denial, naturalising the urban environment, combating pollution, restoring nature to its rightful state, prioritising refurbishment over new build that consumes ever more land, controlling excessive and speculative pressure from tourism, preventing social inequality, and not giving free rein to the few are, among other tasks more closely related to real and substantive sustainability, just some of the issues that this book raises and that we should demand our authorities address.

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INTRODUCTION

"We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves."
John Berger[5]

This study critically examines what is currently understood as territorial reading. It conceives the latter as a form of reacquaintance with the territory that necessarily entails the interpretation of the signs and relationships present in it to unveil new meanings. The reading presented here focuses on a territory of agricultural and fishing tradition located in the north west of the Iberian Peninsula. The area has undergone a slow process of transformation that can still be perceived. It is home to a scattered community comprising roughly seventy villages, the smallest of which may have barely half a dozen inhabitants while the largest, of which there are few, have around four hundred. The study area, which covers approximately ninety-five square kilometres, is geographically singular on the Atlantic coast of the Galician region.

The objective is to understand this ever-changing relationship between humans and territory. It starts from the premise that there is a bond between the observer and the subject of observation that goes beyond bare contemplation. This bond is expressed through manifestations of feeling or private acts of emotion; these allow for a more qualitative assessment of the territory than the array of documents produced for its control and protection. The aim is therefore to identify, both rationally and emotionally, the codes that articulate this territory; the research uses current approaches that combine experiential with analytical, rational with poetic. The territory is therefore approached in its descriptive, biographic and symbolic dimensions.

Over the course of this study, when analytical reasoning was hindered by lack of data on areas of modest historical significance, the experiencing of the territory by means of present and evoked sensory perceptions provided the necessary anchors to surrounding stimuli. The reading adopts a poetic

5. John Berger: *Ways of Seeing*, p. 14.

freedom to understand the scientific and is also open to suggestion. Reading is therefore, seen as understanding and as expression of an emotional complexity that attempts to places itself at the moment of change and in what it means for our current mindset.

In the current context of climatic and social emergency it is becomes more than ever necessary to acquire an awareness of these inextricable relationships. An accelerated process of transformation is taking place in the essential components of the territory. The technoscientific complex that informs our worldview and drives an economic system that depletes resources and seems incapable of offering hope carries the risk of objectifying and accentuating the division between nature and culture.

To justify the relevance of the reading, a reflection on the concepts of landscape and territory is included, as they relate to architecture. The prominence of the former, which is derived from the legal protection granted to it this century, requires tracing its foundational ideas. By sifting through those ideas shared by the different disciplines centred on its study and confronting them with the notion of territory, a methodological approach can be guided. The objective is therefore, to define the terms used.

The reading is threefold and reflects on the interplay between the territory's scientific, historical and significance-based dimensions. It first sets out the scope of study by describing its visible traits and what the official records document about it. Quantitative, quantifiable and experienced data are provided and presented emotively and expressively. These are followed by the temporal frame, a narrative of the historical events that triggered the changes captured by cartography. It concludes with an interpretation that introduces the tangible elements of the territory that have shaped the culture of the community living there. In essence, the reading reveals the never-ending transformation of "its structure, its face and form, and its meanings."[6] [own translation]

The use of records was crucial both to represent what was learned and to advance our understanding. The three aforementioned readings do not constitute partial readings, but rather attempt to form a synthetic and global reading. Data, reflections and images provide arguments also through their evocative power. Expressing a human-invented abstraction whose meaning depends on the significance created by relationships necessarily involves interlacing languages and formats. Text, drawings, photography and video help to give equal weight to the intellectual and sensory forms of intuition and to demonstrate this complexity by pushing each medium to explain what only it can. Among them, and for obvious reasons, the audiovisual piece conceived as indissociable from the reading is hosted separately on a freely accessible digital platform. It measures the duration of the phenomena described and represents a way of seeing and hearing that supplements the other content and elicits signification.

This publication also provides the opportunity to reorder, refine and distil the doctoral thesis from which it originates. It incorporates more personal photographs that prompt other associative mental images and narratives. The rewriting and time passed since required viewing and understanding again the territory subject of study. Everything contributes, is transformed by the process and persists, thus anchoring memory. Representation is necessary to avoid simplifying the traits of cultural identity and to amplify the territory's evocative power. Emotion constantly contrasts the rational and the sentimental and nourishes new reflections. There is no reading without the human element, nor person free of emotion.

6. Eduardo Martínez de Pisón: "Los componentes geográficos del paisaje", p. 137.

The findings allow us to imagine a possible future built on invariants capable of conveying significance, particular long-lasting nuances and ways of seeing that distinguish the identity or character of the territory and form the source of its ceaseless change. They recognise the fragility of the present moment of transformation, where the interests of the territory as a product consumed by an expanding community can lead to its mythification, depletion or superficial signification under external, global codes. It acknowledges the undisputed abandonment of the traditional industries that worked the sea and land, the growing insistence of the climate crisis and the steadily spreading urban attitude that instils a new relationship to place. It reflects on the subjectivity with which a culture constructs a space, on the mindset of a community that has lived there since Neolithic times and that, reciprocally, has been shaped by the territory it inhabits. In short, it reflects on the ties between humans and their surroundings.

The surveying includes an analysis of local toponyms, since all human occupation of territory entails the naming and recognition of place, and Galicia is particularly rich in complex toponymic forms. Words give name and confer to memory. Names are learned because they locate stories in place, provide explanations and endure within the territory. Tracing their origins reveals not only the inhabitants' worldview but also the locale's land uses, architecture and history. The thesis addressed this topic in a separate annex, however here snapshots are introduced throughout the assessment.

The area under study is a fragment of Galicia's Atlantic coast in the province of A Coruña. It faces the ocean from a position bounded by two *rías* (Corcubión–Cee and Muros–Noia), two mountains (Mount Pindo and Mount Louro) and a waterfall (Xallas). It is criss-crossed by a network of secondary roads which link half way with primary ones. Tourism's impact on the area can be considered moderate when compared with the disfigurement relentless development is inflicting on nearby coastal districts. History reveals that it is precisely the remoteness that characterises this territory what makes it so particular.

The triggers for this research were my professional experience on the architectural and planning fields in one of the municipalities in the study. However, the underlying reason rests on a question of values. First, on a common way of being and seeing shared with a community that relates itself to a territory. Second, on a community that both conditions and is conditioned by the territory it inhabits. Personal values bind me to this territory. The loss of landscapes of my childhood and memory have implications on my way of being in and relate to the place I inhabit. The social value is therefore that of commitment to a community I belong to.

Biographical note

Elisa Gallego Picard (A Coruña, 1973) holds a PhD in Architecture from the Polytechnic University of Madrid's (UPM, 2019) School of Architecture and a master's degree in Digital Photography from the New York School of Visual Arts (2015). She has lectured at the Polytechnic University of Milan (2017–2018) and guest lectures at universities and art schools throughout Europe and worldwide. She is curator and editor of an anthology of writings and photographs by the architect Manuel Gallego Jorreto, in whose firm she is a partner and with whom she has worked for more than 20 years. She also practises as an architect and photographer through her own studio.

Her interests focus on analysis of territories and their architecture as physical and cultural creations but span the full complexity of the relationship between communities and the places they inhabit. She won the 2018–2019 Extraordinary Award for a Doctoral Thesis presented by the UPM and The Fourth Manuel de Solà-Morales European Prize presented by the Polytechnic University of Catalonia through the Barcelona School of Architecture's Urban Development Laboratory.