

*The 'ordinary' can be inspiration for an artist, just as much as the 'special'. Duchamp's urinal is seen as a threshold in our understanding of this – and so, one might say, are the sticks and stones of environmental art. One might also say that 'Double Negative' - just a trench in the desert – is ordinariness writ large.*

*The works of the land artists are art – to be liked or not as such. The work of the landscape designer, even when conceived as an artwork, has to function. It has users. Landscapes are made of real-life places; they are not just pictures we can walk in.*

*Landscape designers have a tendency to try to eliminate ordinariness. In doing so they likely also eliminate a place's history and relevance. In this Article, a Fine Art graduate who is now pursuing a course to qualify as a landscape architect describes how her feelings for once-functional relics influence her response to a student design project.*

*Martin Spray*

## OBJECTS OF THE ORDINARY

HOLLY DICKENSON

**"Landscape may be represented by painting, drawing or engraving; by photography, film and theatrical scenery; by writing, speech and presumably even music and other 'sound images'. Before all these secondary representations, however, landscape is itself a physical and multi-sensory medium (earth, stone, vegetation, water, sky, sound and silence, light and darkness, etc.) in which cultural meanings and values are encoded."**

W.J.T. MITCHELL [1]



LANDSCAPE DESIGNERS have the ability to deliver beautiful and interesting places, and in doing so put their creative mark on the landscape. But what gives a landscape meaning for its users? Is it the characteristics of the design, the formations of the land, historical or cultural associations, personal perception – or a combination of all of these? When a place has a particular meaning for people it is remembered, and discussed by them. Landscapes can be completely transformed by either good or bad design, but what is that makes a good design?

I would argue that good design can be inspired in particular by an artistic interpretation of the world we live in. Landscape design can be inspired by the reality of na-

ture, no matter how beautiful or how ugly, boring or mundane. By looking at the individual elements within a site and using an artistic interpretation of them to inform the design approach we can deliver unique, creative and site specific landscape designs.

As an artist turned landscape architect I feel I would like to avoid the traditional boundaries of the two subjects and let my inspiration for my own art practice aid me in my design approach. I would like to make site-specific designs, creating interesting places and artistic landscape installations which enhance a site's sense of place and challenge pre-conceived concepts of what should be art and what should be landscape design.



At the end of the 19th. century, modernists started systematically breaking down and isolating the elements of art. A new theme occurred within the art world: Art must be a quest for truth, however brutal, and not a quest for beauty. This deconstruction of the art process led to an era when art would become obsessed with the truths that the world is not always beautiful but, as Stephen Hicks puts it, "fractured, decaying, horrifying, depressing, empty and ultimately unintelligible". [2]

Artists wanted to concentrate solely on an art's uniqueness and the uniqueness of each artistic medium; for example painting is not literature so it should not try to tell stories. During this period painters reduced the process of painting to make it pure, in the sense of 'painting is paint', by eliminating reality, 3-dimension, Brush-strokes, colour, composition, perceptual content and art-as-object.

The process of elimination led artists to concentrate on one core subject in its simplest form. In turn this reductionism eventually led to the acclaimed Marcel Duchamp and his 'Fountain'. This act of making an object of everyday life become a piece of art prompts the question: If it is not art, why is it not art?



**'Fountain' Marcel Duchamp**



**Holly Dickenson - 'That lonely place' depicts a bench, this bench overlooks the severn vale from Cleeve Hill and is used by many people, including myself, to admire the view. This place has special memories for me so I decided to make the bench and tree the object of view. By isolating the object and exaggerating its isolation the object becomes the piece of art'.**

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This led to many artists drawing inspiration from the complete opposite of what it had been thought art should be inspired by – they used the banal, ugly, boring or apparently uninteresting to inform their approach. Through isolating the object of inspiration the viewer is forced to look at something they would not normally perceive as art and question the integrity of that object.



Richard Serra [3], inspired by the minimalist movement of post-modernism, creates sculptures which emphasize the engagement between the viewer, the site and the work. In the early 60s Serra began to use unconventional, industrial materials to accentuate the physical properties of the art. In doing this he singled out an element and used this to emphasize the materiality of his sculptures which he saw as always site-specific. His work was often seen as controversial and not everyone liked it: a commission for a sculp-

ture in New York got many complaints about its obstructiveness, which eventually led to the piece being demolished. Serra focuses mainly on large scale work, including many site-specific pieces that engage with a particular architectural, urban or landscape setting. His pieces often create interesting angles and views when walked between, which gives a great sense of physicality. In his series 'Torqued Ellipses' (1996 -99) "gigantic plates of towering steel, bent and curved, leaning in and out, carve very private spaces from the necessarily large public sites in which they have been erected". [4]



**Richard Serra 1996-99 "Torqued Ellipses"**

Rachel Whiteread creates art out of the ordinary. Many of her works are casts of ordinary domestic objects – especially the negative space of the objects, creating solid casts of the space around the objects, such as particular parts of rooms and the areas underneath furniture. 'House' (1993) was a concrete cast of part of a Victorian terrace, the rest of which had been knocked down. Whiteread received mixed responses to this sculpture and the piece was dismantled after a year.

This take on reductionism was also translated to the world of landscape design. In an issue of Landscape Journal on Nature,

Form and Meaning, Laurie Olin remarks: "The only thing we can know about the world is that which exists now or has existed in the past. To make something new we must start with what is or has been and change it in some way to make it fresh". [5] According to Olin, Artho Danto declares "works of art as mere real things", implying that the central activity of art is to transform ordinary (or extraordinary) real things into things that are art – which is where we find ourselves again looking at the work of Marcel Duchamp and his urinal.



The deconstruction of art as process has intrigued me to look at my own approach to art and landscape design. Since the beginning of the modernist era, the art world has been fascinated by the reality of nature including its brutality, the ugly or the mundane.

The desire to depict an object of the ordinary and translate it into a piece of art alters the viewer's perception of that object and challenges the fundamentals of art practice. Design, however, is different from art. Whereas art is purely at the hands of the creator, design is a process of form and function and must be informed by the user for it to be functional. This does not mean that design cannot have an artistic approach but rather that the approach must take into consideration the function and user of the intentional design.

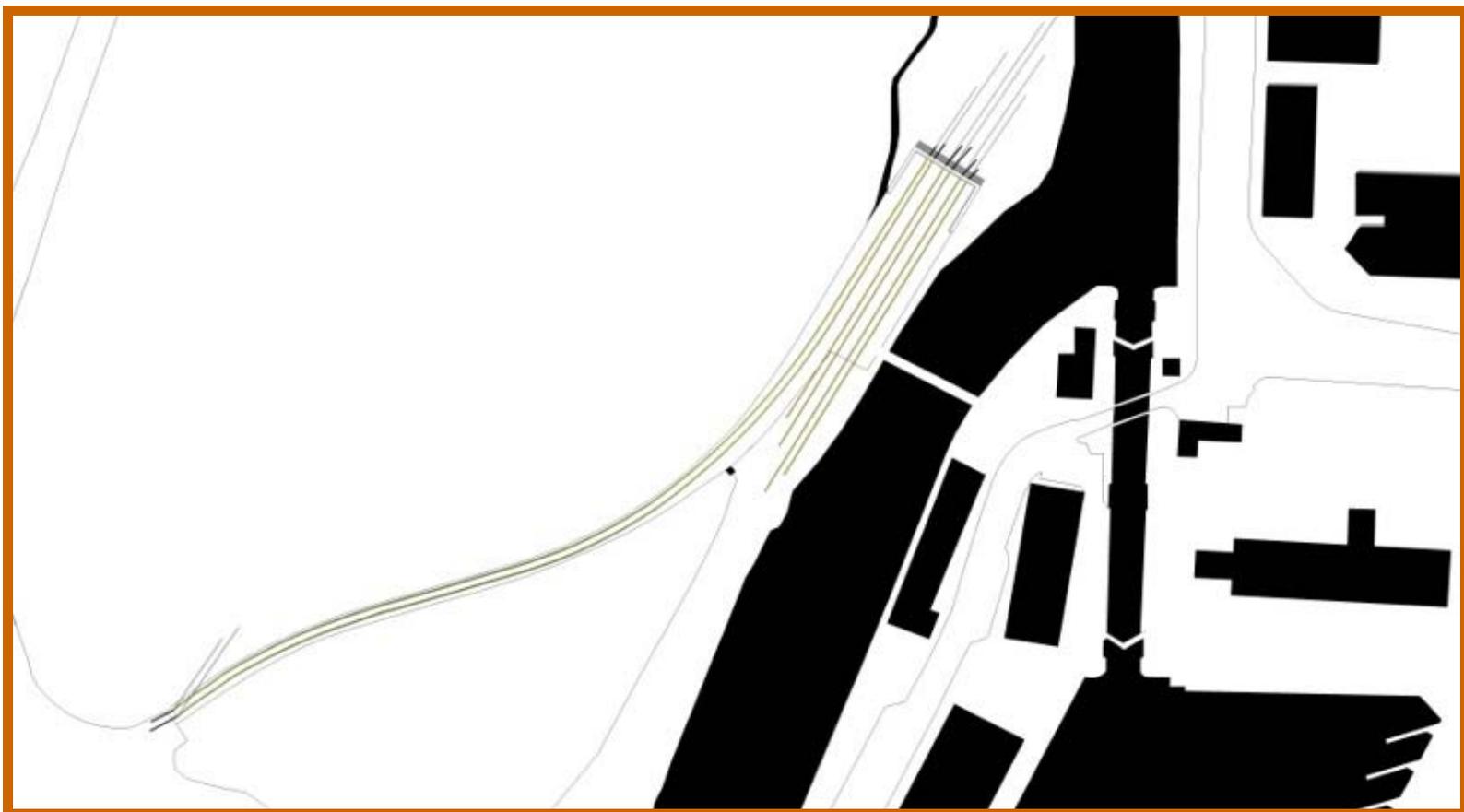


**Rachel Whiteread 1993 'House'**

Like the artists of the modernist era and those inspired by reductionism, I would like to inform my design approach with an in-depth look into each site, taking inspiration from the site regardless of whether it is something beautiful or something otherwise. Isolating one key element of the site will highlight its form and materiality and invite the viewer to question the

integrity of the landscape and to think about its uniqueness. Inspiration for a design usually comes from beauty in nature, from historical research, or idealism and from replication, For me, like the artists of modernism, inspiration comes from the reality of the world around us.

As part of the postgraduate course one module titled 'Place and Meaning' provided the chance for a more artistic exploration of landscape architecture. The module was broken down into three assignments. The first was an essay on our intended approach to design – what inspires us and what informs our design decisions. The second was putting this into practice by applying our approach to our own chosen site. Lastly, we asked to critically review the whole process.



**Relationship of the riverside Castle Mead [left], rail bed, river, dock [lower right], roads, and prison [upper right].**

For this project I wanted a site which is disused, in disrepair or not regarded highly, and to transform the site with the above approach to change perception and enhance sense of place.

The site I chose is an area of disused land located on Alney Island in Gloucester. The area, between the River Severn and The Docks, the

Gloucester & Sharpness Canal basin, was previously the site of Castlemeads power station which supplied the national grid from 1943 to 1969. Its foundations now lie under a car-park used by Gloucestershire County Council staff, and the road which leads from the car-park to the city centre via a wooden swing-bridge is the line of the railway track that took coal from canal barges at a jetty to the power-station. Rail lines can still be seen on the jetty but have been removed from the road connecting the jetty to the car-park. The jetty has a concrete wall on three sides, and you can still see anchor points for the barges on its riverwards side.

The site is close to the historic Docks, with their shops, museums and offices. A public right of way, the Glevum Way foot-path [Glevun is the city's ancient name], runs through the site and the car-park is open to the public at weekends. It is a well used site, but due as it is prone to flooding for a large proportion of the year it has been left undeveloped. The area is now predominantly overgrown and is left disused and in disrepair.

There are views of Gloucester's cathedral from the site, though it is overlooked by the County Council offices. It is also overlooked by Gloucester Prison.

This connection with Gloucester Prison tells a particular story about the chosen location. A Council worker, Anna McGurck, used to park her car in the Castlemeads car-park. A prison inmate watched her every day. After his release in 1991, he followed Anna one night, and raped and murdered her. The death of Anna led to a change in the English law on bail. There is a small memorial plaque at the start of the track next to the car-park.



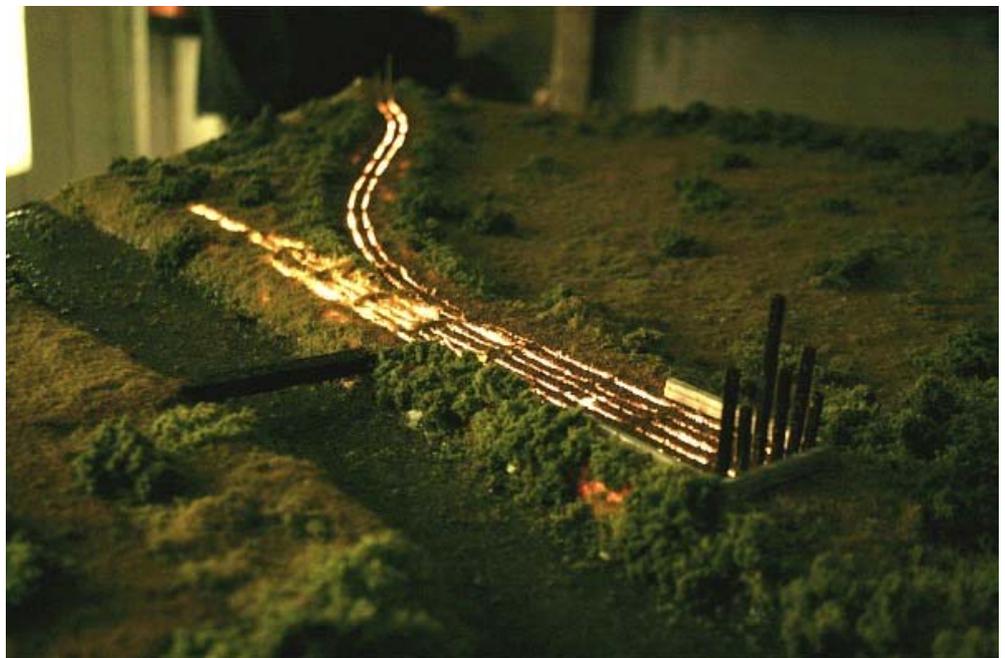
The inspiration for the design came from the site's distinct history and associated meanings, which, however, are hidden – or certainly not obvious. The car-park obliterates the remains of the power station and most else; however the rails still visible on the jetty offer a reminder of the past. In my design proposal the railway lines have been extended back down the track, re-connecting the jetty with the foundations of the power station.

In the proposal the railway tracks are illuminated as a reminder of and connection to power and our continual need for electricity. The city's present supplier is out of sight. Power-

stations and objects associated with them such as pylons are usually regarded as ugly and an eye-sore. [6] Yet we are dependant on them, and they are our connections with the modern world. In the design, the reinstated and illuminated railway lines would extend upwards towards the sky. These lines would be steel columns with light emitted from the ends, representing the power once provided from the site.

The illuminated tracks are also a reminder of the death of Anna McGurk. At present there is a memorial close to the carpark where Anna was murdered and these lines would end at this point before they extended upwards, signifying Anna's last journey down the track.

It wasn't my intention, but the design has become a memorial both to the past, taking inspiration from the site and paying tribute to Gloucester's industrial heritage, which is quickly becoming lost and forgotten, and to the untimely death of Anna McGurk.



**Views of a light-box model of the proposal show the railway tracks which would be illuminated as a reminder of the site's past association with power. The top image also reminds us of its former danger, representing the view from a prison window.**



## Notes & References

1 Mitchell, W. J. T. (1994) in *Landscape and Power* :University of Chicago Press. Available at <http://www.envf.port.ac.uk/geo/courses/land2.htm> (accessed 5.10.09).

2 The Atlas Society, *Why Art Became Ugly*, Stephen Hicks, Available at: [http://www.objectivistcenter.org/cth--958-Why\\_Art\\_Became\\_Ugly.aspx](http://www.objectivistcenter.org/cth--958-Why_Art_Became_Ugly.aspx) (accessed 09.10.09)

3 Moma Exhibitions, *Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years*. Available at: <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/14> (accessed 22.10.09)

4 PBS, *Art in the 21st century*, artist biography: Richard Serra. Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/serra/> (accessed 25.10.09)

5 Olin, L, (1988) 'How to see something common and banal in a new and fresh way is the central problem in Art' *Landscape Journal* vol. 7, issue on: Nature, Form and Meaning,

6 The fascination, and both the ugliness and the beauty of ordinary things in the landscape is well shown in *Infrastructure. A field guide to the industrial landscape*, Brian Hayes, W.W. Norton, N.Y./London, 2005.

## Suggested reading

Wikipedia – Rachel Whiteread, Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachel\\_Whiteread](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachel_Whiteread) (accessed 22.10.09)

The Guardian – Rachel Whiteread. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2007/sep/08/art10> (accessed 22.10.09)

Wikipedia – Richard Serra, Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_Serra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Serra) (accessed 25.10.09)



*Holly Dickenson is a graduate Landscape Architect working in London and hoping to continue to blur the boundaries between art and landscape design. She is still actively involved with fine art. [www.hollydickenson.co.uk](http://www.hollydickenson.co.uk)*