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Professor Hubert Locher, 'God's Own Junkyard'. Architecture, Photography, and Society

Hogan Lovell Lecture Theatre, Durham University.
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Professor Locher's lecture was titled God's Own Junkyard after Peter Blake's 1964 publication of the same name. The title, which plays on the well-known American phrase "God's Own Country", is a wry play on words and sets the parameters of Blake's humanistic outlook on architecture, photography and society. Blake was born in 1920 in Germany and attended school in London where her trained as an architect. While his training was never completed, a chance encounter with the head of the Museum of Modern Art, Philip Johnson, led to Blake attending the symposium entitled: 'What is happening to Modern Architecture?', and he subsequently took up a position as curator at the museum.

For Blake, architecture not seen as a series of structures but established spatially. His publication called for a new critical architectural approach where landscape integrated within architecture and enacted upon one another in a reciprocal process. This insight was also shared by the likes of architects Mies van der Rohe in his construction of Farnsworth House, Pierre Koenig's Case Study House No. 22, and in the works of Robert Venturi. The latter took interest in Blake's work and
included two of his images in his publication *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (1972), the gas station and the infamous duck structure served as both architectural type and a visual signifier for Venturi’s postmodern message for a new approach towards architectural history and a break from the modernist aesthetic ideals. Referring directly to Blake in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), Venturi wrote, 'But the pictures in [God’s Own Junkyard] that are supposed to be bad are often good.' (p.102)


At first Blake’s photo book may appear an obvious vehicle for the architectural critic’s modernist outlook. But on closer analysis we find that the publication is more than an aesthetic piece, in fact it is overtly political, encapsulating themes of land development and the shaping of environment,
how photography is used as a supportive evidence, and the nexus between image, text and cultural criticism. The first section of the photo book is pure text followed by various 'scapes': *Townscape, Landscape, and Skyscape* are purely illustrative. Blake shapes his book as a coherent public discussion and so his words and images are to be communicated both verbally and visually, where “words and images [are] ... composed in tandem, and mutually supportive.” (Blake, 1993, p.164). Locker notes that Blake's choice of the photo book is also significant: integrating images and text results in a more conversational reading where the two entities "speak" to one another; pictures on their own speak for themselves; while the photo book presents the visual as "firm" evidence. In this case, the text calls and the image responds.

Like a court trial, viewers are presented with the visual evidence followed by Blake's final verdict. The photographs are used as 'evidence' in the original sense of the word. The images are curated as a visual argument which displays the spatial totality of the American environment. Remaining true to his brief architectural training and curatorial experience, Blake compares past and present images which was a traditional practice in both Art History and Architectural Criticism. These images are arranged vertically, the negative image always takes the lower position and is narrowly cropped. Following the formal criteria of Classical Art, the positive image is given more space as well as a clear structure where the viewer's eye is directed towards a central focal point. The spatiality is clearly defined.

In an attempt to engage with current public opinion, Blake criticises cultural consumerism, the rise of residential structures and standardised social housing. While the latter were cheap to make Blake insisted that their 'lack of imagination' and standardised design would lead to ghettoization, socialisation and the loss of individual and communal identity. Images of Levittown are used as Blake's prime examples, the rows of "little boxes" are photographed from the air and as a result are somewhat detached. No description accompanies the image which implies that Blake thought the monotony of the town was plain to see, the photograph is instructive; no caption is needed.

Future perspectives of the modernist city were destroyed by chaotic consumerism, debased American culture, ugliness, apathy and junk. Blake insisted that “No people has inherited a more naturally beautiful land than we: ... the only trouble is that we are about to turn this beautiful inheritance into the biggest slum on the face of the earth.” (Blake, 1964, p.8) Upon viewing Times Square, New York, Blake does not see architecture, but untidy, cluttered advertisements. The viewer is not faced with buildings, but visual images. What we have is an image of an image, which is also spatially constructed. The billboard of the 1962 film *The Counterfeit Traitor* starring William Holden evokes the notion that advertisements are dishonest from the outset and are not to be trusted. Yet the montaging of images and employment of billboards were a common technique in the Pop Art movement and often acted as a visual pun on social and political concerns. Further questions over the aesthetics of consumerism the disposability of junk are also raised, thus depicting the multifaceted nature of images as they are deployed and transformed through time and space.
The images provide a rather neutral idea of progression, yet Locher asserts that anything depicted in a photograph become bearable to the viewer as the event is from a distant time and place. But later, the double pages convey degradation and death, adding a weightiness to Blake’s argument as seen in the employment of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s image of the crucifix. The images conceive a condensation of the verbal argument: the photographs speak a clear language where Blake acts as curator when choosing which images and well-known artists to use.

Self-consciously chosen images imperative. While the image of the duck-as-architecture embodies abstract aspects of irony, for the disparity between its form and function – which later became an exemplar for Venturi’s postmodern aesthetics – the duck is also humorous and ambiguous. It is not a critical image, paralleled with a photograph of people feeding ducks – families of people and families of ducks – Blake’s main concern is confirmed: that social structure shapes our environment.

![The Big Duck](image)

The Big Duck otherwise known as the “Long Island Duckling” (1931), Flanders, New York

This new idea of perception, of the spaces in between and the uses of both space and architectural place not only renewed the idea of architecture and the town as an integrative landscape but turned towards the notion of a new environment. Blake’s understanding of architecture is one of shaping nature at large. While pictures may serve as evidence they may also in fact provide new solutions and intertextual perspectives between architecture, photography and society.