PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES WHERE WE GO

Photography enables us to see beyond the boundaries of everyday life in ways that were once unimaginable. Images and commentaries address subjects such as aerospace, exploration, geology, medical imaging, military planning, mining, oceanography, tourism, travel, transportation, and virtual reality.

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By Phil Patton

Phil Patton, design and cultural historian, is surprised by what he sees when he travels to an often photographed but seldom visited architectural masterpiece.

Photography changes the movies we choose to see
By Preminda Jacob

Preminda Jacob, associate professor of art history and theory at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, looks at how monumental, hand-painted billboards in India represent a historic intersection of photography, painting, and the movies.

Photography changes our environmental awareness
By Brian O'Connor and Irene Klaver

Visitor contributor Brian O'Connor and Irene Klaver, academics working on new media and relations to the environment, write about how photography and increased visibility can bridge the gap between the natural world and human interaction.

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PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES OUR ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

Story by visitor contributors
Brian O’Connor and Irene Klaver

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If you were to read on a map, even a hybrid map with a satellite photograph, the words “Soil Conservation Service's Hickory Creek Basin Retarding Pond #16,” would you want to head right over there for a walk, to go fishing, to paddle a little boat, to show your kids beavers swimming at dusk? If you were to see a picture of a duck couple sitting at the edge of the water at SCS 16, would you be more inclined to do any of these activities?

For people who have stumbled upon “SCS 16” and for others who have seen photographs of beaver, ducks, young couples in love by the water, herons, and the duck couple, SCS 16 is now simply the “little lake.” It has become an integral part of the community as more than a portion of the hydraulic infrastructure. It is now a little lake with its own interface between beaver, heron, human, snake, fish, water, disc golfers, and flood management.

Photography brings out how important these open and undifferentiated spaces are for contemporary modern life. Almost regardless of its hydraulic function, SCS 16 has set the stage for natural and cultural opportunities and occasions that have supported unexpected and continuing natural and cultural engagements. These hybrid technological–natural structures dissolve hard-edged separations between human built/technology and nature, social-economic cultures, different practices. City planners, developers, nature organizations, sports clubs, and the general public begin to recognize the capacity inherent to structures, as local retardation ponds, to enhance the lives of local residents beyond the pond’s role as hydraulic retardation structure.

Photographs give us a way of documenting and presenting ways in which a piece of infrastructure becomes hidden, yet can take on a secondary infrastructural role as the location for community interaction with a different form of natural world. At the same time, interest in the little lake, its inhabitants, and its environment may enable ways to foreground, at least upon occasion, the municipal infrastructure.

Functionality of infrastructure usually has an inverse relation to its visibility: the better it works the less we experience it. We generally see photographs related to malfunctioning or disaster: when the town is inundated we see photographs. Photography connects the engineered hydraulic space with bio-cultural practices, ideas and ideals, delivers the possibility of seeing more, to reveal the interface of nature and culture. Nature has, in a sense, reclaimed the infrastructure, providing a space for culture, while keeping an edge of wilderness. The little lake makes possible seeing unexpectedness in the shape of beavers “patrolling their territory” at dusk, the cormorant spreading its wings on top of the “No Swimming” sign, the disc golfers searching the water for their errant discs, the heron in its hunting position, and the duck couple enjoying their water domain. Photographs enable others to see the possibilities of a little lake, a little hydraulic structure, and set out for their own engagement there or enjoy them from afar.

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