



CONVERSATION: "Taste and place: re-imagining the urban fringe"

5.30pm to 7.30pm on Monday 25 January 2010, in the

Members' Study at the

Royal Commonwealth Society,

25 Northumberland Avenue, London WC2N 5AP Tel: 020 7930 6733

Taste and Place: Re-imagining the Urban Fringe

A moral economy is one which is "... founded on custom and attributed status as the dominant conditions of human relationships." A political economy, "... founded upon contract and the status provided by access to capital and the means of production"¹, became dominant during the Industrial Revolution. The effect of industrialisation and urbanisation on cities has been exceedingly well documented and needs little explanation. The Industrial Revolution also colonised the countryside with mines and mills while it consolidated the means of agricultural production and distribution. The emergent relationship between city and countryside was less clear than it had been in the Middle Ages, where dense cities were separated from the surrounding territory by a strong demarcated boundary. Now cities displayed a dense core and a diffuse boundary where agricultural production, noxious industry, waste and transport corridors interwove. The haphazard nature of the resulting landscape was so disorganised as to be apparently placeless, and which thus fit uncomfortably within the emerging notion of the exurban countryside as a collection of picturesque bedroom communities set within an extended recreational area. The urban fringe became uninhabitable not just because of its diminished salubrity but also because it defied comfortable classification.

In Europe, the decline of industry and the rise of the service sector have shifted production overseas, and modern distribution networks have given global reach to urban territories. The urban fringe, relieved of the pressure to produce under contract (and with economic efficiency) is once again ripe for inhabitation, but to do so creatively and productively requires a re-imagining and restructuring of the values associated with dwelling there. What is missing is a romanticised notion of what might constitute a life in such a setting. Dwellings in the urban fringe and urban shadow could begin to form the basis for a new style of settlement not dissimilar to the Jefferson model of the gentleman farmer and his smallholding, with the supportive community and civic framework of a moral economy.

Key to imagining a sustainable future for the urban fringe is the re-inhabitation of the landscape with people who do so out of volition or earnest vocation, in the same way that the ideal inhabitation of the city is by people who aspire to city life, rather than those who see it as drudgery or regard it with fear. Why not envision a future in which everyone does what they love and lives where they want to? It is important to design the physical setting for this, to construct the framework for a contemporary moral economy, and to build the set of beliefs and tastes that will make productive, enriching everyday practice possible in the urban fringe.

¹ Cosgrove, Denis. *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. Madison, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984, 1998. p. 224.