

# The Concrete Pastoral

Eli Elinoff

In Thailand's limestone belt, small farms – like the one in the first image on the following page – sit adjacent to monoculture fields planted with rice or industrial crops such as jute, sugarcane and corn.<sup>1</sup> Here, a breeze rustles through neat rows of chili plants. Behind, a sea of corn stalks grows among islets of palm and bush. Puffy clouds drift over crags in the distance, a gash of exposed limestone where peaks once stood. Their stone has become aggregate, which is crucial for making concrete, comprising up to 80 percent of its volume.

This is the concrete pastoral: an aesthetic of jarring spatial proximities and disjunctive superimpositions produced by the transformation of stone into cement, concrete and aggregate. Dusty quarries bisecting placid hills; industrial installations amidst emerald fields; the material shadow of the city erupting into the countryside.

<sup>1</sup> In this short piece, I bracket the specificities of the Thai case, which I have written about extensively elsewhere (Elinoff 2017, 2020).

*A quarry sits high above  
a small farm, Ban Mo,  
Saraburi, Thailand.*  
Photo: Eli Elinoff, 2023.



*One of the largest cement  
factories in Thailand  
standing above a field  
of industrial sugarcane,  
Kaeng Khoi, Saraburi.*  
Photo: Eli Elinoff, 2019.



Japanese photographer Naoya Hatakeyama's work on Japanese quarries and cement factories in *Lime Hills* (1986–91) and *Lime Works* (1991–94) has far-reaching resonances in this context. His photographs mobilized this aesthetic to disrupt the perception of distance between extractive centers and urban spaces. Hatakeyama suggested that quarries and cities are “like negative and positive images of a single photograph” (Hatakeyama 2018: 255). By reappropriating the aesthetics of pastoral landscape photography, his images remind us of the urbanist Lewis Mumford's insight that cities always come from something being un-built somewhere else (Mumford 1970 [1938]: 150–152). Hatakeyama's work also presaged more recent theorizations of “planetary” and “extended” urbanisms (Brenner 2014; Brenner and Schmid 2015: 167, respectively), which emphasize the expansive, seemingly inescapable, reach of the enmeshed webs of urban space and capital.

This conveyor belt (below) feels like an apt embodiment of this analytic. Running for several kilometers, it links the quarry where limestone is mined with a cement factory, where the mined stone is milled and then cooked at 1400C becoming clinker. The clinker is then ground again and mixed with gypsum, becoming cement. That cement is then shipped through webs of depots, trucks and distribution centers. It is either bagged and sold to individual consumers or it is combined with aggregate and water in the form of ready-mix concrete for larger projects traveling across vast landscapes in churning mixers. These logistics are materially dense, linking the quarry and city in intimate ways. The city has an insatiable demand for stone. From this angle, it has no outside (Brenner 2014).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> My ongoing research traces political ecologies of Thai concrete employing archival, ethnographic and visual methods. The photos here are from that project.



**A conveyor belt moves stone from a quarry to a cement factory below, Kaeng Khoi, Saraburi.**  
Photo: Eli Elinoff, 2019.

Yet, beyond, around and within webs of extraction and construction, life continues in complex ways. Is it possible to read the concrete pastoral, particularly its aesthetic of paradox and inversion, differently? Can the aesthetics of ecological disjuncture, so common across extractive landscapes globally, but especially in Southeast Asia where I work, draw attention to the “messy webs” where the “material and the symbolic intertwine” (Oswin 2018: 544)?<sup>3</sup> Can we ask different questions of these paradoxes, leveraging their irresolution to consider the other forms of life that subsist within concrete pastoral spaces?

<sup>3</sup> Southeast Asia has been a rich space for debate about the reach and limits of planetary urbanism (see Gillen, Bunnell and Rigg 2022).

Doing so requires rejecting the ideological smokescreen of the pastoral (Williams 1975) while also holding the totalizing nature of the planetary urban in tension. Stone from this quarry has gone somewhere, becoming that building, highway or dam. In this, the concrete pastoral asserts relations.<sup>4</sup> Stone cement and aggregate draw worlds together, creating tense connections that foreground concrete's richly social properties (Elinoff and Rubaii 2024).

<sup>4</sup> See Harvey 2010 and D'Avella 2019.



↑ A mound of tires sits in a depot outside a cement factory, Khaeng Khoi, Saraburi.

Photo: Eli Elinoff, 2023.

← Buddha waiting to cross the highway, Khaeng Khoi, Saraburi.

Photo: Eli Elinoff, 2019.

At the edge of a cement factory, a pile of tires collects in a depot. The mound of worn rubber suggests another vision of the work of moving stone. Rubber bears the weight of materials in motion. Worn tread makes visible the effects of bad roads made worse by the weight of the materials that move across them as cement, aggregate and concrete

are plied between sites of extraction, production and consumption. Can frayed rubber push us to consider the exhausted bodies of laborers who travel through the same difficult conditions?

The concrete pastoral also leverages gaps, interruptions, inversions and negative spaces to set an analysis into motion. The temple across from this cement factory is not a piece of rural ephemera lost within the extended urban sprawl, but evidence of ways of living sustained in and through stone extraction. Temples are common in such extractive spaces, where sacred mountains sit adjacent to or even within profane, dangerous quarries. Temples mediate the risk of precarious work. Occasionally, they



← This pond is where F.L. Smidth & Co. extracted marl for the cement that was eventually exported to Thailand in the early twentieth century, Aalborg, Denmark.  
Photo: Eli Elinoff, 2018.

↓ A golf course at the Mae Moh Lignite mine in Lampang province, Thailand.  
Photo: Eli Elinoff, 2020.





*In the last few years, this defunct quarry in Chonburi became a sought-after backdrop for selfie takers.*

Photo: Eli Elinoff, 2023.

even forestall further development. The mountain behind this temple was not mined for fear of disturbing its spiritual potency.

At the same time, the pastoral also emerges out of the extractive. Ducks splash in the flooded hole of a moribund Danish quarry. Below lies a whole history of the future, an important early source of cement exported to Asia at the turn of the twentieth century (Pedersen 2021). Golfers enjoy a day out on the rim of the open-pit lignite mine once used to fuel Cold War cement factories in northern Thailand. An abandoned aggregate mine in central Thailand becomes a backdrop for a picnic and a selfie. For an entry fee of 300 Baht (10 USD) you can take your picture here too. As extractive sites are depleted, they become something else – new environments for an afternoon idyll. In the right light they are oddly beautiful.

*Aggregate waiting to be incorporated into a renovated sidewalk in Bangkok.*

Photo: Eli Elinoff, 2020.





If you're looking for them, even weirder pastoralisms erupt in the city. Piles of gravel, sand and rubble that clutter the sidewalk in Bangkok not only look like the mountains they came from but, upon closer inspection, reveal themselves to be the selfsame materiality made strange. These piles are on their way to becoming something else, perhaps a fancy new hotel or just a blockage in the city's sewer systems as rain washes them down the drain. Either way, they make up a fleeting and novel urban ecology. Or, perhaps they become just the right kind of nuisance: an interruption in a city-dweller's walk to the bus stop that plants a seed of irritation that inspires a vote for regime change at city hall. A few years after the photos above were taken, a new Governor of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration was elected on the back of a range of technocratic promises to fix the city's ensnared infrastructure. Within his platform, the [jumbled condition of its sidewalks received special attention](#).

*A pile of rubble becomes a mountain made strange, Bangkok.*

Photo: Eli Elinoff, 2020.

The concrete pastoral reveals the city and the countryside enmeshed in one disjunctive, distributed material ecology. Simultaneously, it suggests that urban forms and extractive spaces are never straightforward. The planetary urban may not have an outside, but the concrete pastoral reveals that it has plenty of within, throughs, arounds and beyonds.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Natalie Oswin's (2018) important critique of planetary urbanism raises this point.

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