

Tracking Across the American Desert

Filmic Translations of American Landscapes to the Helmand Valley and Back

Andy Lee

To cite this article: Andy Lee (2023) Tracking Across the American Desert, Journal of Architectural Education, 77:2, 290-304, DOI: [10.1080/10464883.2023.2233376](https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2023.2233376)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2023.2233376>



Published online: 10 Oct 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 16



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)





Narrative

Tracking Across the American Desert

Filmic Translations of American Landscapes to the Helmand Valley and Back

Andy Lee
Harvard University

This paper explores the remapping of the American landscape as a mass reproducible visual medium onto foreign territories - particularly Afghanistan - during the Cold War. A series of films produced by the US Bureau of Mines and later screened in these territories are the sites of analysis. These films were the source material that applied the American landscape in its many forms, climates and uses to the US's physical infrastructure projects during the time. As sights, these projects of infrastructure building are indicative of the colonial gaze US technicians used to reproduce these landscapes and their underlying systems of power and class around the world.

Keywords: film, picturesque, mass media, sightseeing, settler colonial

Setting the Scene

In the late 1950s, Rebecca Ansary Pettys, the daughter of Amanuddin Ansary, a United States-educated Afghan who had been appointed by then-king of Afghanistan Zahir Shah to administrate the newly created Helmand Valley Authority (HVA), looked out across the Helmand Valley. Its arid landscape is known as *Dasht-e Margo*, Dari for “Desert of Death.” Despite the bleak moniker, the valley is sustained by the Helmand River, which drains 40 percent of Afghanistan by land area, and for millennia has served as an essential lifeline for the region. At its confluence with the Arghandab River, Shah-appointed Afghans, including Amanuddin Ansary, along with their US counterparts—who had just spent the preceding decades irrigating the southwest desert landscape of the US as part of the US Bureau of Reclamation—built the town of Lashkar Gah. The town was modeled after the urban landscapes of the United States: houses were visualized and designed as American analogues in order to give “a visual effect of openness.”¹ The residential streets of Lashkar Gar were built with US metrics—as wide as a suburban road in the new Sun Belt developments in the United States. Lashkar Gah—“army barracks” in Persian—became known to both Afghans and Americans alike as Little America. In his 1960 visit, historian Arnold J. Toynbee remarked that the “new world they are conjuring up out of the desert... is to be an America-in-Asia.”² Little America, the headquarters and bureaucratic epicenter of the HVA, was the catalyst for the visual transformation of an entire desert basin, and ultimately, an entire nation. American technicians sought to simulate the visual culture of the American West, a geography settled and filled in with an idealized vision of US urban life: abundant waters and the ensuing capital and pleasures of modern

American living.³ Tracking her vision across the Helmand Valley, Pettys recognized the cinematic vision the Americans wanted to project onto the desert: verdant landscapes that would bring Afghanistan into the modern world.⁴ That *vision* is the central *sight* and *site* of this paper.

Six decades later, in the “Desert of Death,” Lashkar Gah and its surrounding villages would witness some of the most violent fighting between the Taliban and NATO troops. The Helmand Valley represented the increasing, if not ever-present intractability of the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan by US and allied troops since 2001.⁵ Over twenty years of US occupation, the provinces of the Helmand Valley remained Taliban strongholds, the nexus from which the group regained control of the country.

The history of an American, imperialist vision for Afghanistan and its southwestern desert, however, was much more enduring. Its narrative begins much earlier with moving images depicting New Deal-era transformations of Arizona by the US Department of the Interior (DOI) and its Bureau of Reclamation. The ultimate, confounding pullout of US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, and the concurrent, rapid re-takeover of the country by Taliban forces depicted Americans disastrously entangled within a self-image decades in the making. Since the 1950s, the United States had relentlessly projected a series of moving images onto the Afghan desert. Short films such as *Arizona and Its Natural Resources* presented the moral imperative of the US resource state in remaking the aridlands of Afghanistan into an American image.⁶ The endless filmic montage presented to the American public during the US occupation was, in effect, an American movie that metastasized into a spectacular failure of US foreign policy.

This montage reflected the methodology of the American desert as a screen composed of images. The US government operationalized

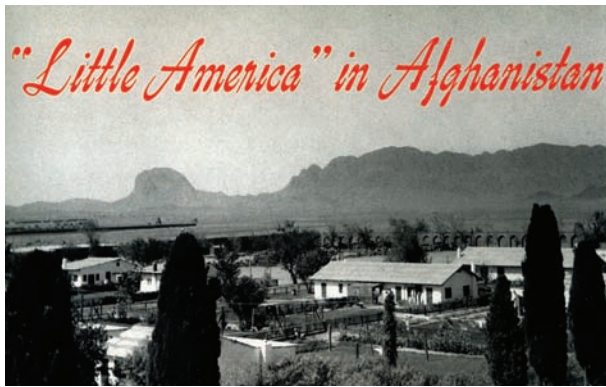
the visuality of the American desert to reproduce, here in Afghanistan, systems of US state power that undergird its image.⁷ Landscape, as we know, is a dynamic medium, one “in which we live and move and have our being, but also a medium that is itself in motion from one place or time to another.” In the same paragraph, W. J. T. Miller notes “motion pictures” as the medium through which landscape (re)produces power.⁸

This text tracks American landscapes as they traveled through time and geography to Afghanistan. Serving as the method of tracking is the film *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, produced by the DOI in 1955 and screened in several “Third World” countries as part of the Point 4 program during the Cold War. This narrative follows the imaginaries of the American desert: from the Point 4 program in the 1950s, when *Arizona* was produced and then screened in Afghanistan, to its material implications at the Helmand Valley throughout the Cold War and into the twenty-first century (Figure 1).⁹ The film and associated archival correspondence reveal the sight of ideological invention of the modern American desert, and their constructions at the sites of the Helmand Valley and in Arizona.¹⁰

Tracking Visions Abroad

Since its inception in 1849, the DOI was tasked with the day-to-day task of US settler colonialism, “naturalizing” the continent into the “United States.” Only through indigenous subordination to European sovereignty did the “interior” appear as a domestic entity at all. Its “interior-ization” of the continent into the “United States” involved the fundamental transformation of landscape, particularly with the arid terrains of the West and Southwest, into visions of so-called abundance.¹¹

Mitchell describes landscape as a medium of representation, an image that naturalizes a “cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable.”¹² In



Opening figure. A military demonstration in Kabul, August 2020. Photograph by Jim Huylebroek. Courtesy Jim Huylebroek.

Figure 1. Left: Reprinted from Morrison Knudsen Company, Inc. 1951. “Little America in Afghanistan.” *The Em-Kayan*, May 1951. Courtesy Boise State Digital Collections. Right: Still taken from *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, courtesy National Archives.

Arizona, the cultural construction around the Sun Belt and its ever-sprawling suburbs rests entirely on “falsely upholding the perception of an abundant availability of water in the desert,” a falsehood whose existence requires the reproduction of US state power. Such a perception normalizes—and materializes—the modernist belief that “aridity is simply a supply chain problem,” as Danika Cooper argues, representing and continuously reproducing a cultural myth around modernist hydraulic infrastructure as simply given and solely, uniquely, and incomparably deployed by the US federal bureaucracy.¹³ Piece by piece, the US settled and reorganized the landscape of the continent into an American image of exceptionalist resource stewardship.

After World War II, the US Department of the Interior directed its enormous bureaucratic apparatus outwards. Its westward facing “Manifest Destiny” gazed further west across the Pacific Ocean to draw other countries away from Soviet influence and into American technical orbits. Ostensibly employed as a

tool of domestic US federal natural resource management, the DOI looked to reapply its methods and techniques in settling the United States to “Third World” nations, to ‘interior-ize’ and ‘build’ them in an American image. Known as Point 4, the program was the US’s first articulation of civilian foreign aid as an anticommunist measure.¹⁴ As a part of this program, the DOI and its Bureau of Mines (BOM) produced a library of films depicting the vast, infrastructural transformation of the US and the resulting richness of American life. These films were widely screened in countries that were recipients of aid under Point 4, and each was a spectacle of reimagining and re-imagining the American landscape on a global scale for foreign territories (Figure 2).¹⁵ By 1955, the DOI Division of Foreign Activities, stationed in countries such as Afghanistan, Colombia, Israel, and Mexico, presented films that served as domestic analogues to their foreign technical aid projects, including *The Evolution of the Oil Industry, Texas and Its Natural Resources, A Story of Copper, The Story of Nickel*, and *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*.¹⁶ As moving images, the films exhibited the many cultural and climatic contexts around the DOI’s domestic landscape transformations—from the humid subtropical forests of Texas to the arid shrublands of the Sierra Nevada—that were projected onto Point 4 projects. Each mapped the cartography of American frontier-ism into these distant lands. Representation of Arizona’s transformation and its plentiful resources—oil, copper, nickel, coal,

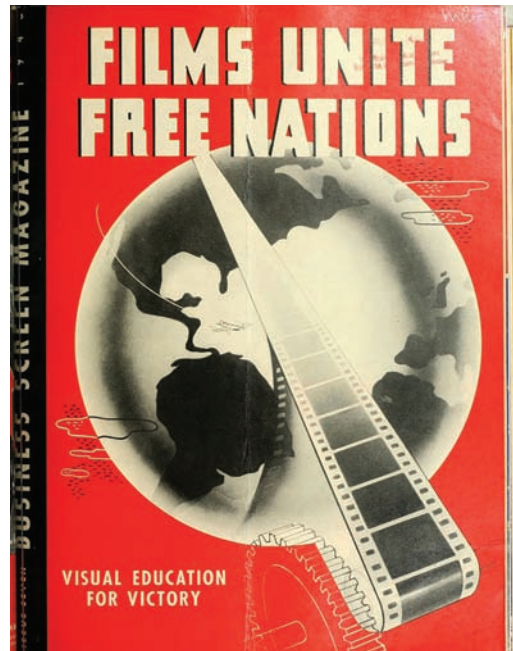
and crucially, water—were screened in Afghanistan, highlighting the powerful and productive potential of American technologies. Film became a tool for the projection of Point 4 landscapes into a visual medium.¹⁷

Tracking Visions of Development

Scholars of Cold War international development aid projects, such as Timothy Mitchell, discuss development as a discourse of representation, where “the peculiar methods of order and truth that characterize the modern West” rely on “setting up the world as picture.” The West understood the world as though it “were divided... in two: into a realm of mere representation and a realm of the ‘real’; into exhibitions and an external reality; into an order of mere models, descriptions or copies, and an order of the original.” The experience of much of the modern world can thus be defined as a Western construction of representations and models that, as Chandra Mohanty notes, perpetuate Western superiority.¹⁸ “Representation” and “models” are used here in the ways Mitchell and Moharty refer to them: as a series of images that re-present the material world through the lens of Western episteme.

Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar, who had resisted US development aid in student movements during the 1960s, writes of how development discourse is a “colonization of reality,” where theories of development had achieved “the status of a certainty in the social imaginary.” In the post-World War II era, Western politicians

Figure 2. Films that showcased industrial practices were widespread throughout the 1950's and were a crucial component of the United States' Cold War effort. Cover of *Business Screen Magazine* courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library *Business Screen Magazine*, February 1943.



saw Asia, Africa, and Latin America as impoverished and backwards, defining the political and cultural terms with which countries like Afghanistan had to systematically transform and “un-underdevelop” their societies. At the time, it seemed impossible to “conceptualize social reality in other terms.”¹⁹ DOI’s films set the imaginary. They established and showed the “world as picture” through the landscapes of the American West. They deployed the cinematic mythology of the American Frontier—an aesthetic project of image making that became, in effect, an act of world travel. Here, the colonizing visitor inhabits the landscape as a tourist, and consumed the site as a series of images that were remade with US interest. The settling of this “frontier-scape” and the subsequent rapid (sub)urbanization of the region went hand-in-hand with the growth of global tourist culture and American cinema. Tourism, a “visual absorption of space,” and cinema merge in the American West.²⁰ Landscape theorist Iris Cahn ties together the tradition of American landscape painting and the establishment of American cinema as subjects “linked to the adventure of the railroad, tourism, and later, to the rugged backdrop

of the mythic West.”²¹ As a series of images itself, the American Frontier itself travels. Under the rubric of “Containment” during the Cold War, the US government extended its influence into Afghanistan through the strategic and deliberate use of film, underscored by an idea of the mass reproducibility of its landscapes. The American landscape is itself a kind of moving, roving image that establishes and reproduces the gaze of the US settler colonial resource state.

For both the Afghan and US governments in the early twentieth century, the southwestern desert of Afghanistan was an unmapped, unplanned *terra nullius* waiting to be filled and linked to a global capitalist economy defined largely by US hegemony. Afghanistan was profoundly shaped by the drawing of the Durand Line. Inscribed in 1893 by British imperial ambition, the 1,200-mile border between Afghanistan and Pakistan marked a “division between different types of imperial control.”²² The boundary sought to divide and pit Pashtun peoples on each side against each other, negating a united and shared identity perceived as hostile to British interests. Zahir Shah, a Pashtun ruler of a newly independent Afghanistan between 1933 and 1973,

saw in the heartland of southern Afghanistan the possibility of an ethnically homogeneous state restored from the ruin and exploitation of British imperialism—despite his reliance on British (so-called) support. Following World War II, Shah turned to the newly minted superpower of the United States, which itself had remade the American landscape through the violent ethnic supremacy of US settler colonialism. The first Prime Minister of Afghanistan’s newly independent neighbor India, Jawaharlal Nehru, declared in 1954 at the Bhakra-Nagal canal, built under the Point 4 program and with New Deal bureaucratic support, that “when we see big works, our stature grows with them, and our minds open out a little.”²³ In Afghanistan, transforming the desert was its big work, a blank screen on which to reproduce dreams of American capitalism and development.²⁴

Tracking Visions of the Garden

One of the most widely screened films in this film library, *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, (re)presents Arizona as an atlas of the varied, spectacular transformations of its landscape. An architectural space, *Arizona* produces an emporium of the modern, technologically progressive world, ultimately emphasizing the “shar[ing] of its many famous tourist attractions.”²⁵ This meta-architectural space is a “kinetic form of vedute—a multi-form construction of scenic space, a practice of moving sight/site” that establishes an embodied sense of site in the image, a sense of being there.²⁶ US infrastructure projects become traversals of emotion and consumer desire, peripatetic reproductions of landscapes of American modernity. In the desert of the Afghan southwest, the US built out the canals, electric lines, dams, highways, and suburbs that transformed this terrain into a Sun Belt (Figure 3). This took the form of the HVA, an integrated development scheme that sought to address through various aspects of the US federal bureaucracy industry,



Figure 3. The Soviet press described the U.S. engineering company behind the Helmand Valley Authority as “a kind of training centre where young Afghans are moulded to [an] American pattern.” Left: Reprinted from “Afghanistan Looks Ahead,” 1956. International Cooperation Administration. Right: Still taken from *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, courtesy National Archives.



education, agriculture, transportation, electricity, and hydrology.²⁷ The 29-minute film is short but incredibly moving—kinetically and emotionally. *Arizona and Its Natural Resources* begins with DOI technicians arriving to a once desolate area of the Arizona hinterland.²⁸ Their arrival sparks a journey through eight distinct chapters that are organized according to the various aspects that characterized the HVA scheme, where “the deserts are being turned into gardens... that far surpass the dreams of the conquistadores” (Figure 3).²⁹

What emerges in *Arizona and Its Natural Resources* is a contemporary picturesque: a pleasure garden in the desert that invites the audience to participate and emotionally experience an Arizona of leisure and enjoyment. Gleaming diversion canals lead from one monumental dam to another, cutting eventually to plentiful fields of grain, melons, and dates. Sleek, silver trains bullet towards the audience. Newly constructed highways disappear around corners,

beckoning the audience into national parks. Suburban wood-frame housing is being built, and through aerial shots, cascades *adinfinitum* out across an urbanizing landscape. Depicted are factory workers and university scientists, along with examples of productive labor created through federal authority. The footage then cuts to skiing in mountains and boating in lakes. A clearly joyous form of tourism is enabled by the DOI’s transformation of Arizona. The spectacle of Arizona’s transformations is beamed onto Afghan screens, inciting the observer to imagine that this, too, could happen in their lands. The spectatorship of the film was a “practice of space that is dwelt in.”³⁰

The sightseeing continues. At one instance in the film, we visit a poolside fashion show. Close-ups of jewelry and the sumptuous, colorful dresses worn glamorously by fashion models further entice the viewer to put these clothes on too—to “fashion” themselves into the psychogeographic spaces of Arizona (read: US) modernity.³¹ The film renders vision tactile, an appropriation by the viewer where an “inhabitation of space is achieved,” as Giuliana Bruno asserts, “and architecture and film are bound by this process.”³² The film becomes an architectural promenade, a passage through which the viewer tours modern Arizona as a garden of touch and sight. Arizona

is being constructed here through the screening rooms of Afghanistan. Fused together, it is a site of exploration between public sights/sites of American infrastructure and the private spaces of consumer enjoyment. Observers wear new outfits as they travel from filmic space to filmic space: a ski jacket in the mountains, a summer dress at the pool, each outfit a screen, in and of itself. The screen they are watching the film on becomes the skin they wear (Figure 4).³³ Distant viewers take an embodied trip of infrastructure as image, journeying through the transformative potential of these landscapes. In the Helmand Valley, these Arizona infrastructures assemble into a moving image of American progress, to be similarly embodied and inhabited as an act of touristic consumption. Tracking across the highway in Helmand, the valley is now seen as a montage of American modernity. One might as well be driving along the transcontinental highway in Arizona, seeing the power of American infrastructure and of American architecture. The Helmand Valley was an Arizona, remade, in Afghanistan (Figure 5).³⁴

Tracking the Ground in Afghanistan
Peace Corps workers during the ‘50s and ‘60s noted the effect of visual reproduction on Afghan people at this time, particularly in urban centers. Thomas Goutierre, a Peace Corps



Figure 4. Left: Afghan residents residing in Lashkar Gar in the 1950's, courtesy of Rajiv Chandrasekaran. Right: Still taken from *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, courtesy National Archives.

volunteer stationed in Afghanistan, remembers that “Afghans at parties would dress fit to kill, they would use American and British fashion magazines.... [T]hey were very fashionable at parties.”³⁵ Afghans embodied themselves in the Western garden through Western fashion, attitudes, and lives. The landscape of the American West, in its global reproductions, “always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which we find or lose ourselves.”³⁶

Several decades after their initial introduction into Afghanistan, these reproductions continued to shape the spatial, social, cultural, and political lives of Afghans and others in the Central Asian region. Afghanistan was in a near constant state of war beginning with the Saur Revolution and subsequent Soviet invasion in 1978. Correspondence between BOM officials in Afghanistan prior to 1978 reveal a seemingly never-ending cascade of problems leading up to the revolution, a mirage of US prestige that served as the backdrop to Afghanistan's next several decades of violent conflict (Opening Figure).³⁷ Instead of the “kingdom of abundance” offered by *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, post-World War

II development discourse can be read as a loss of illusion: widespread resource exploitation, impoverishment, and violent conflict.³⁸ This is a history underwritten in Arizona and the American West yet whose challenges manifested most tellingly on Afghan ground (Figure 6).³⁹

After creating new farmland from newly irrigated tracts of land along the Helmand River, HVA technicians discovered a nearly impermeable layer of subsoil, with water often pooling on the surface of the soil, rather than draining as anticipated. Dasht-i-Margo sits on a low desert plain of coarse gravel deposits, unlike the low deserts of Arizona, which sit largely on clay and silt. Either way, the Americans failed to conduct a survey before beginning the project. US technicians in Afghanistan, also part of the intended audience of BOM films, bought directly into the mythic transformation of the desert in *Arizona and Its Natural Resources* without conducting further examination of the ground.⁴⁰ The arrival of white Bureau of Reclamation officials do cut directly to magnificently watered fields both in Afghanistan and in *Arizona*, “a land where reality has become far greater than the dream.”⁴¹

Evaporation left a layer of salt that dramatically stunted agricultural cultivation. BOM officials in Afghanistan note that “in places the salt makes the lands look as if they had just received a light snow,” an incongruous image in a region

that receives less than 0.35 inches of annual precipitation.⁴² Farmers, lured by the Afghan government under the promise of wealth-generating fertile croplands, saw decreased yields year after year as salt continued to accumulate in the soil. By the mid 1960s, Afghan farmers in Nad Ali, one of the first significant settlements near the Helmand River built by US engineers, whose farming tracts and irrigation canals echoed the filmic visions of Arizona's transformation, reported only a quarter of the yield compared to their first year of use. The material realities of the Afghan ground, its ecologies, geologies, and its environmental histories, counter the fantasy of exported filmic visions of American spatial expertise. “The number one major agricultural problem in the Helmand Valley projects is that of soil salinity—Alkali and drainage.”⁴³

US and Afghan officials are both well aware of the ongoing problems of their project in the valley. Behind the curtain of the American garden is an acknowledgement, even by the mid 1950s, of its failure. We read a BOM official noting in classified correspondence regarding farming in the Helmand Valley: “I would like to point out at this stage of the review of the project, that it could prove to be a very big failure.”⁴⁴ Despite this, the project continues, underscoring the tightly woven entanglement of image and material projects. That same correspondence notes that “the prestige of the United States is



Figure 5. Forms of the American hydro-
infrastructural landscape reproduced
by the moving image. Stills taken from
Arizona and Its Natural Resources,
courtesy National Archives.



Figure 6. Top: Canals built through Point 4 funding in 1957, courtesy of Boise State Digital Collections. Bottom: Still taken from *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, courtesy National Archives.



inescapably involved in the success or failure of the project.... The failure of the project for any reason would be a severe blow to American prestige and American relations in this part of the world.”⁴⁵ Here, the underlying cultural and social mechanics of *Arizona and Its Natural Resources* are reproduced in in the Helmand Valley: a deliberate façade and narrative that conceals, however fraught or dangerous, ongoing and increasing risks of water scarcity and the associated socio-ecological consequences (Figure 7).⁴⁶ Failing infrastructure and systems are retained as artifices of US projections to maintain geopolitical ambitions—Afghanistan be damned/dammed.

As it turns out, the opium poppy is relatively well adapted to the political-ecological circumstances of the Helmand Valley. In addition to the dry climate, the opium poppy is encouraged by the alkaline and saline soils, a circumstance exacerbated decades earlier by both US “development” and by serving as the ground of intense fighting during the Soviet invasion and the civil war. By the year 2000, the Helmand Valley produced 39 percent of the world’s heroin, representing at least \$40 million in tax revenue for the Taliban regime (Figure 8).⁴⁷ During these initial years in power, the Taliban government continued to invest in the infrastructure of dams in the Helmand Valley, ultimately

completing one of the projects that had been started by the United States: the Kajaki Dam’s hydroelectric plant in 2001.⁴⁸ And in another ironic turn, several months later, during the first weeks of the US invasion, US bombers destroyed that same plant.⁴⁹ Reality here is certainly stranger than fiction; real sites so much more than imagined sights. Despite the increasing intractability of the conflict in the region, the US continued to pour resources into Afghanistan—particularly to the sites of Marjah, Nad Ali, and Lashkar Gah, all major projects of the HVA—hoping to sustain the illusory effects of a Little America that projected American technocratic dominance. A farce of US image and imagination was broadcast

AFGHANISTAN - PROGRAMS

1955-57

Algeria - No space

CONFIDENTIAL
(Security Classification)

DO NOT TYPE IN THIS SPACE

5401
00540

AIR POUCH
PRIORITY

FOREIGN SERVICE DESPATCH

FROM : ~~USIA, WASHINGTON~~ **USIS**
~~USIA, WASHINGTON~~, KABUL

TO : ~~USIA, WASHINGTON~~

REF : **USIA OM Jul 17 3:02 PM '56**

8 SEP 1956

November 6, 1956

4 For Dept. Use Only	ACTION REC'D	DEPT. OTHER	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23	11/23
	11-23	10/1PL	11L	10C	1GC	1CS	1MS ³	1RS ⁴	1BS ⁵								

SUBJECT: **USIS-Afghanistan Country Plan: Revision of Country Objectives.**
State 20 **ICA⁵ CIA² OSD² OCB² Army⁵ (OC PW-DIA) Navy⁷**

GENERAL STATEMENT

The new country objectives for Afghanistan, which have been agreed to jointly by the Mission, are designed with the following goals in mind:

1. To consolidate the United States beachhead of influence in Afghanistan and to extend it to key areas;
2. To assist in relieving Pak-Afghanistan tensions;
3. To strengthen Afghan ties with other anti-communist countries;
4. To plant doubts regarding Soviet motives in Afghanistan and create an awareness of the danger of playing with Soviet fire;
5. To help build up the strength of Afghanistan.

In brief, USIS is charged with utilizing its informational resources in order to assist in the fulfillment of long and short term objectives of U. S. foreign policy. If these objectives are to be achieved the following principles must be taken into consideration:

1. Afghanistan must be kept independent, and
2. The Soviets must be deterred from using Afghanistan as an extension of Soviet influence into South Asia.

Afghanistan's independence (mentioned in the first point) is currently being endangered by offers of Soviet largesse, although it is generally conceded by top officials that they must be on the alert to keep the government free of domination. Afghanistan's claim that it is a poverty-ridden country, needful of aid from anyone willing to grant it, and the country's irridentist movement in respect to Pushtoonistan are elements which represent a danger, since Afghanistan seems willing to go to dangerous ends to achieve these goals, including accepting assistance from

CONFIDENTIAL
INFORMATION COPY

SWBalden
REPORTER

Figure 7. Correspondence between State Department officials and technicians in Afghanistan consistently referred to the importance of American prestige in the region despite a mounting set of problems. Declassification NND927848, courtesy National Archives.



Figure 8. Top left: road at the edge of Kandahar city, courtesy Jim Huylebroek; top right: still taken from *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, courtesy National Archives. Bottom left: farmers harvesting opium poppies in Maiwand, Helmand Province, courtesy Jim Huylebroek; bottom right: still taken from *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, courtesy National Archives.

worldwide across television and digital screens. The foundational elements of the US federal resource bureaucracy were on display: the ideological invention of the American West and its global reproductions. Over the past twenty years the US military, both in Afghanistan and in many other parts of the Global South, violently and tragically sought this filmic illusion.

Tracking Visions to Arizona

While it is important to note the downstream ecological and social effects of an Arizona in Afghanistan, this text avoids an age-old, colonial story of a mismatch between an imperialist power and a society unsuited to its technologies.⁵⁰ Practitioners of landscape risk falling into this trap today, where projects focus, rightly but excessively, on downstream ecological, legal, and political fixes to the myriad environmental woes of today.⁵¹ Instead, the dynamics of development as a discourse of representation underline landscape transformation as an aesthetic project, where the gaze of

the architect is brought to the fore. The aesthetic image of the American landscape is powerful enough to generate the decades-long, ongoing geopolitical displacements in foreign territories such as Afghanistan.

The unfolding material conditions of an Arizona in Afghanistan speak to—intentionally or not—the continuous implications of “world as picture.” Born in the mass reproduced image, the Western landscape conception has reproduced its gaze across the globe as a form of aesthetic and cultural supremacy. The assumed—and violently imposed—primacy of the gaze produces and constructs not just the perception of the material world, but the material world itself. In the practice of landscape architecture, representation and form are inextricably linked, the space between a constant slippage through which landscape is constructed (Figure 8).⁵²

If, as French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard famously pronounced, the tracking shot is a question of morality, then the global tracking shot of

the US development aid apparatus is underpinned by the depth perception of settler colonialism. Might we, however, take Godard's adage and see through the Helmand Valley and track across a newly considered view of the American landscape?⁵³

Arizona and Its Natural Resources reflects the screen-ness of the film, certainly, but also the screen-ness of its spatial and infrastructural implications. Afghanistan was rendered as a US tracing: a garden of self-idealization. Defining it as such highlights the possibility of repositioning the American landscape in Arizona; to, building on Escobar's methodology, "separate ourselves from it by perceiving it in a totally new form."⁵⁴ Here, an alternate view of the American West is perceived, un-insulated and perhaps inverted from its westward gaze: an Arizona desert as an analogue representation of US foreign political conflicts, without ever losing the ethical compass of the damage wrought by US projections of itself both domestic and foreign. Landscape architects must more seriously engage their own medium of representation in this pursuit.

Tracking our vision across Arizona today, as Rebecca Ansary Pettys had near the Helmand Valley's Little America in the 1950s, a cinematic montage of the hubris and vanity of the US federal resource state emerges in the desert. The architecture and infrastructure of *Arizona and Its Natural Resources* become spatial follies, not just of and in the American desert, but also in the sites and sights of landscapes within its geopolitical orbits, both historical and contemporary. Arizona—and other American landscapes—can be read in the way the US interior has always ultimately read itself: as a screen that extends itself across the globe and touched down with devastating and lasting consequences in the Helmand Valley.

As practitioners of landscape explore, in the rapidly shifting context of climatic change, alternatives and radical reconfigurations to the Western landscape of modernity, the role of representation, its methods,

and its aesthetics must be critically engaged. The virtuality of *Arizona and Its Natural Resources* multiplies infinitely: today the architectural promenade of filmic space encompasses more and more of our material reality, a world composed of screens.

Notes

- 1 Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 24.
- 2 US Agency for International Development, *Helmand-Arghandab Valley, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (Lashkar Gah: USAID, 1969), 55–59; Hafi-zullah Emadi, *State, Revolution, and Superpowers in Afghanistan* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 41.
- 3 Notes on terminology: This paper uses both "United States" and "America." "United States" is a nominal identifier, whereas the paper makes a distinction with "America" as an ideological formation. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the United States government has invoked the use of the word "America" or "American" to, paradoxically, both universalize its identity, politics, and culture across both American continents, and make exceptional its unique role as an arbiter of freedom and democracy. The term "America" to describe the politics, culture, and economics of the United States reflects the imperialist dynamics with which the word is used in the United States, and how these dynamics construct the ideological formations of the mythic West and the frontier. "American" is also used to describe individuals from the United States. For a critical take on the image of "America" the United States sold through Cold War information programs, see Laura A. Belmonte. *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). Likewise, the paper capitalizes "West" and "Frontier" to emphasize the terms as ideological inventions and not just signifiers of geographic space. The paper also makes use of the anachronistic term "Third World" in the context in which the U.S. government and Cold War diplomats used them as a part of the Point 4 program. I use the term in the way diplomatic historian Jason G. Parker explores the term, in terms of the effort to shape foreign public opinion in ways that served national strategic

interest during the Cold War, both for global superpowers and for Global South countries. As outlined by Parker, its defining qualities were "a stance of Cold War nonalignment, a need for economic development to overcome the poverty that imperial rule had left behind; and an often implicit, vaguely romantic sense of nonwhite solidarity." Any use of the term references the contemporaneous use of term as a "Third World" identity coalesced both through U.S. and Soviet public diplomacy and from Global South actors. When possible, the paper avoids the term and uses "Global South." For more on the coalescence of the Third World as it relates to Cold War public diplomacy, see Jason G. Park. *Hearts, Minds, Voices: US Cold War Public Diplomacy and the Formation of the Third World*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

4 This paper invokes travel as a binding force in the relationship between film, and the architectural ensemble. Giuliana Bruno notes that "Viewed through the lens of travel, the relationship between film and the architectural ensemble unfolds as a practice of mobilizing viewing space that invites inhabitation." Travel culture provided the original tracking shot, where a culture of tourism consumed sites as sights, which the "tracking vision" of Rebecca Ansary Pettys references. Giuliana Bruno, "A Geography of Moving Images" in *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002) 56.

5 Journalist Rajiv Chandrasekaran recounts oral histories from residents of Lashkar Gah during the Cold War in Rajiv Chandrasekaran. *Little America*, 15–34.

6 The film library of the Bureau of Mines is largely kept as physical, un-digitized film reels at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland. While the National Archives retains one copy each that is preserved closely to its original quality, the reels available to researchers are in decay. When unboxed, the film reels give off the vinegar odor of when plastic begins to break down and rot. Most of the colors have faded in the films. They have retained a reddish tone, given that the red dye used in film reels at the time deteriorates much slower than other colors. What is available to the public today is an extremely degraded screening of an otherwise triumphant vision of American

- progress in the Frontier. *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, video Recording No. 306.6912,1955, records of the U.S. Information Agency, Record Group 306; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
- 7 Danika Cooper writes about the visual culture of the American desert in Arizona in Danika Cooper, "The Canal and the Pool: Infrastructures of Abundance and the Invention of the Modern Desert" in *Landscape Research* 47:1 (2022): 35–48.
 - 8 W.J.T. Mitchell, introduction to *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.
 - 9 "Little America in Afghanistan," *The Em-Kayan* (May 1951), 11; *Arizona and Its Natural Resources* 23:67.
 - 10 The film *Arizona and its Natural Resources* is a part of a larger library of films produced specifically by the US Bureau of Mines (BOM), which are available largely as physical film reels in the National Archives and Resources Administration in College Park, Maryland. While an archival research process in the US federal archives – which includes these film reels and contextual, textual correspondence between Point 4 and BOM officials – serves as the primary sources from which the paper considers the American desert as visual media, state archives do not paint the entire story, instead only exhibiting the settler colonial and imperialist gaze this paper critiques. The archival sources and framework present an Afghanistan seen from Washington; further accounting requires archives from Afghanistan itself, largely out of reach following the Taliban's recent ascension. Oral histories from individuals, such as that of Pettys, involved firsthand in Point 4 projects in Afghanistan provide messy, often contradictory memories and visions that displace the primacy of archival evidence. The research draws from scholarly sources across film theory, environmental and diplomatic history, and architectural theory. However, scholarly research from Afghan or Central Asian scholars on development aid in Afghanistan are scarce. The paper thus turns towards scholarly work which, through or by addressing the shared anti- or de-colonial struggle in "Third World" and indigenous communities during the Cold War, further displace the primacy of western and state-based narratives on US imperialism during the 20th century.
 - 11 Megan Black overviews the global reach of the US Department of the Interior, and its depoliticization of natural resource management in pursuing a civilian, foreign political strategy for the US federal bureaucracy. Megan Black, *The Global Interior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018),
 - 12 Mitchell, introduction to *Landscape and Power*, 2.
 - 13 Cooper, "The Canal and the Pool," 36.
 - 14 Point 4 was US President Harry Truman's fourth point in his inaugural presidential address, which declared the United States would "embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas." As a general articulation of civilian foreign aid for Cold War foreign policy, the point encompassed a series of executive order and acts by the US congress. In 1950 the Department of State established the Technical Cooperation Administration (TCA) to administer much of the technical aid assistance programs, authorized under the Foreign Economic Assistance Act of 1950. The United States Agency for International Development, established under President John F. Kennedy, is the contemporary re-organization of the original TCA created as a part of Point 4.
 - 15 For a short, general history of the Bureau of Mines film library and its international distribution, see Black, *The Global Interior*, 132-136; *Business Screen Magazine* 4, no. 7 (Feb 1943) cover.
 - 16 Allan Sherman to Frederick Rocket, July 20, 1955, folder: July 1955, box 7499, Motion Pictures (087.2), RG 70, National Archives and Records Administration.
 - 17 Michael Latham, "Modernization Theory, International History, and the Global Cold War," introduction to *Staging Growth*, ed. David Engerman et al. (Boston, University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).
 - 18 Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse," *Feminist Review* 30:1 (Autumn 1988) 61-88. On a greater agency over self-representation by formerly colonized peoples, see V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
 - 19 Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 5.
 - 20 Giuliana Bruno, "Haptic Routes: View Painting and Garden Narratives" in *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2012) 56.
 - 21 Iris Cahn, "The Changing Landscape of Modernity: Early Film and America's 'Great Picture Tradition,'" *Wide Angle* 18:3 (1996): 85–100.
 - 22 Nick Cullather. 2002. "Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State," *The Journal of American History* 89:2 (2002): 517.
 - 23 Jawaharlal Nehru, Speech at the Opening of the Nangal Canal, July 8, 1954, in *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches* (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1958) 353.
 - 24 Linda Nash's research on the Helmand Province in Afghanistan specifically examined the transfer of U.S. technical experience in building dams in the U.S. to the Helmand Valley. See Linda Nash, "Traveling Technology?: American Water Engineers in the Columbia Basin and the Helmand Valley," In *Where Minds and Matters Meet*, V. Janssen (United States: University of California Press, 2012) 135-164; For Megan Black's historical scholarship on the international expansion of the US resource state, see Black, *The Global Interior*. For a detailed analysis of the use of film as a part of the United States propaganda machine during the Cold War, see Belmonte, *Selling the American Way*. On public diplomacy and the formation of the Third World through mass media-based public diplomacy, see Parker, *Hearts, Minds, Voices*. Timothy Mitchell discusses the unforeseen ecological ramifications of built infrastructure in Egypt during the 20th century, namely the Aswan Dam. His approach encompasses a systems- and process- based approach to landscape research, as well as the focus on infrastructure as landscape that is prevalent in the field today. See Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Kate Orff's work in her book, *Petrochemical America*, is an example of contemporary landscape research that focuses on the cross-scalar, downstream effects of hard infrastructure. See, Richard Mistrach and Kate Orff, *Petrochemical America* (New York: Aperture, 2014); While discourse on infrastructure in landscape architecture has also focused on

- image-making, it has, in the context of US foreign policy, been relegated to the realm of geospatial analysis and mapping, see Pierre Belanger, *Ecologies of Power: Countermapping the Logistical Landscapes and Military Geographies of the U.S. Department of Defense* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016); While an important call to arms to practitioners of landscape architecture in addressing the economic and environmental fallout of 20th century infrastructure and its enabling policies, Belanger's book, *Landscape as Infrastructure*, only discusses their role in relation to novel processes of dispensing landscape form rather than as a critical re-evaluation of the original gaze of landscape architecture practitioners; See Belanger, *Landscape as Infrastructure* (New York: Routledge 2017).
- 25 Allan Sherman to Gov. Ernest W. MacFarland, October 25, 1955, folder 087.2, box 7499, General Files, 1955, RG 70, National Archives and Records Administration.
- 26 Giuliana Bruno analyzes the early picturesque pleasure gardens as a proto-filmic medium of touring in place. See, Bruno, "A Geography of Moving Images."
- 27 On United States foreign political interests in Afghanistan through the Helmand Valley Authority, see Cullather, "Damming Afghanistan."
- 28 Arizona and Its Natural Resources, video Recording No. 306.6912. There are previous versions of *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, including a version from 1948, but were not widely distributed as a part of Point 4.
- 29 *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*. The film's narrative structure is entirely based around distinguishing the U.S. resource state's unique ability, more than that of the Spanish Conquistador or even the 19th century homesteader, to transform the desert in a productive garden; US International Cooperation Division, *Afghanistan Looks Ahead* (United States: International Cooperation Administration 1956) 40.
- 30 Bruno references the early pleasure gardens as proto-filmic constructions of scenic space, drawing closely together the relationship between 19th century English gardens, film, and landscape. Bruno, "A Geography of Moving Images," 62,
- 31 Giuliana Bruno discusses the movies of Michelangelo Antonioni as a form of "spectatorship as fluid as the psychogeographic navigation his female characters are asked to participate in." In films such as *La Notte* or *L'avventura*, the female protagonist embarks on wandering journeys, whose gaze and movements construct both the experience of the movie and one's experience of the new Italian urban landscape. See Giuliana Bruno, "Traveling Domestic: The Movie House" in *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), 99.
- 32 Bruno, "A Geography of Moving Images," 70.
- 33 Chandrasekaran, *Little America; Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, 19:40.
- 34 Beatriz Colomina roots the relationship between film and architecture in the traveling technologies of the time, with trains conveying people from place to place. In this way, the world becomes a placeless emporium, where it is only possible to travel if one did not move. See Beatriz Colomina, "Archive" in *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994); *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*.
- 35 Thomas Goutierre. Interview by Evelyn Ganzglass, January 11, 2022, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky, 2022.
- 36 Mitchell, Introduction to *Landscape and Power*, 2.
- 37 Jim Huylebroek, *A Military Demonstration in Kabul*, August 2020, photograph, in "Inside the Fall of Kabul" by Matthieu Aikins, *The New York Times*, last modified December 28, 2001. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/magazine/fall-of-kabul-afghanistan.html>
- 38 Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 4.
- 39 Lyman Wilbur, 1957, photograph, Lyman D. Wilbur Papers, MS 205, Boise State University Special Collections and Archives; Video Recording No. 306.6912; "Arizona and its Natural Resources, 09:01.
- 40 Bureau of Mines Films were intended to be screened to both US and foreign technicians, with films released often in multiple languages. Chief Projects Engineer to William B. Young, January 22, 1954, folder Colombia, box 7205, General Files, 1954, RG 70, National Archives and Records Administration. Chandrasekaran recounts how the US and Afghanistan never commissioned a soil survey. When they did commission an outside consulting firm to do a study on the project, the firm issued no warnings, despite the apparent problems of the project. The firms, Tudor Engineering Co, was a subsidiary of the original engineering firm, Morrison Knudsen. Chandrasekaran. *Little America*, 15-34.
- 41 *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, 00:50.
- 42 "Proposals for Mechanized Farming in the Helmand Valley," September 21, 1953, folder Afghanistan – Projects – Helmand Valley, Correspondence Relating to U.S. Companies, Federal Government Agencies, Organizations, Foreign Entities and Individuals, Afghanistan, RG 70, National Archives and Records Administration.
- 43 "Proposals for Mechanized Farming in the Helmand Valley."
- 44 "Proposals for Mechanized Farming in the Helmand Valley."
- 45 "XV – Afghan Technical Cooperation," June 3, 1954, folder Afghanistan - Programs, Correspondence Relating to U.S. Companies, Federal Government Agencies, Organizations, Foreign Entities and Individuals, Afghanistan, RG 70, National Archives and Records Administration.
- 46 "XV – Afghan Technical Cooperation."
- 47 William Bach, "The Taliban, Terrorism, and Drug Trade," US Department of State, October 3, 2001, https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/sep_oct/5210.htm.
- 48 "US Pushes to Finish Afghan Dam as Challenges Mount," *Associated Press*, January 6, 2013, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/01/06/us-afghanistan-dam-kajaki/1811773/>.
- 49 Richard Lloyd Parry, "UN Fears 'disaster' over Strikes near Huge Dam," *Independent*, November 8, 2001, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/un-fears-disaster-over-strikes-near-huge-dam-9159118.html>.
- 50 This framework builds on Linda Nash's assertion that "travel constitutes what we understand as technology." She asserts that a continued focus on the linearity of the relationship between Western technology and their foreign aid applications doesn't consider technology as a contested entity among many ecological entities. Linda Nash, "Traveling Technology?" in *Where Minds and Matters Meet*, 153.
- 51 Richard Weller, in response to the University of Pennsylvania's Superstudio program, in which design studios focused on the Green New Deal, asserts that academic student work around the Green New Deal lacks a substantive, aesthetic, and formal vision for an alternate climate future. "The actual designs can be hard to find, and when they do appear, the hand of the designer tends only to offer outlines along with some optimistic

Photoshop showing “the community” enthusiastically filling in the blanks.” Richard Weller, “The Green New Deal Superstudio: Designing the Impossible,” *The Dirt*, March 17, 2022, <https://dirt.asla.org/2022/03/17/the-green-new-deal-superstudio-designing-the-impossible/>.

- 52 Jim Huylebroek, “The front line between Afghan government forces and the Taliban on the edge of Kandahar City in early August.” August 2021, photograph, in “Inside the Fall of Kabul” by Matthieu Aikins, *The New York Times*, last modified December 28, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/magazine/fall-of-kabul-afghanistan.html>; *Arizona and Its Natural Resources*, 22:04; Jim Huylebroek, “Farmers harvesting opium from poppies this month in Maiwand, Afghanistan,” November 2021, in “In Hard Times, Afghan Farmers Are Turning to Opium for Security” by Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Taimoor Shah, *The New York Times*, published November 21, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/21/world/asia/afghanistan-crops-opium-taliban.html>.
- 53 This refers to the Jean-Luc Godard’s famous 1959 quote, “Tracking shots are a matter of morality,” an inversion of the film critic Luc Moullet’s quote “morality is a matter of tracking shots.”
- 54 Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 6.

Andy Lee is the 2020 Charles Eliot Traveling Fellow at Harvard University and an assistant adjunct professor at the University of Wisconsin School of Architecture and Urban Planning. His current research explores the slippage between sight and site inherent to landscape, particularly in relation to American landscapes reproduced during the Cold War. Lee has worked at Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates in Brooklyn, the UN Development Programme in Dhaka, and Leupold Brown Goldbach Architekten in Munich. He holds a Master of Landscape Architecture and a Master of Urban Planning from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and a BS in Architecture from Washington University in St. Louis.