

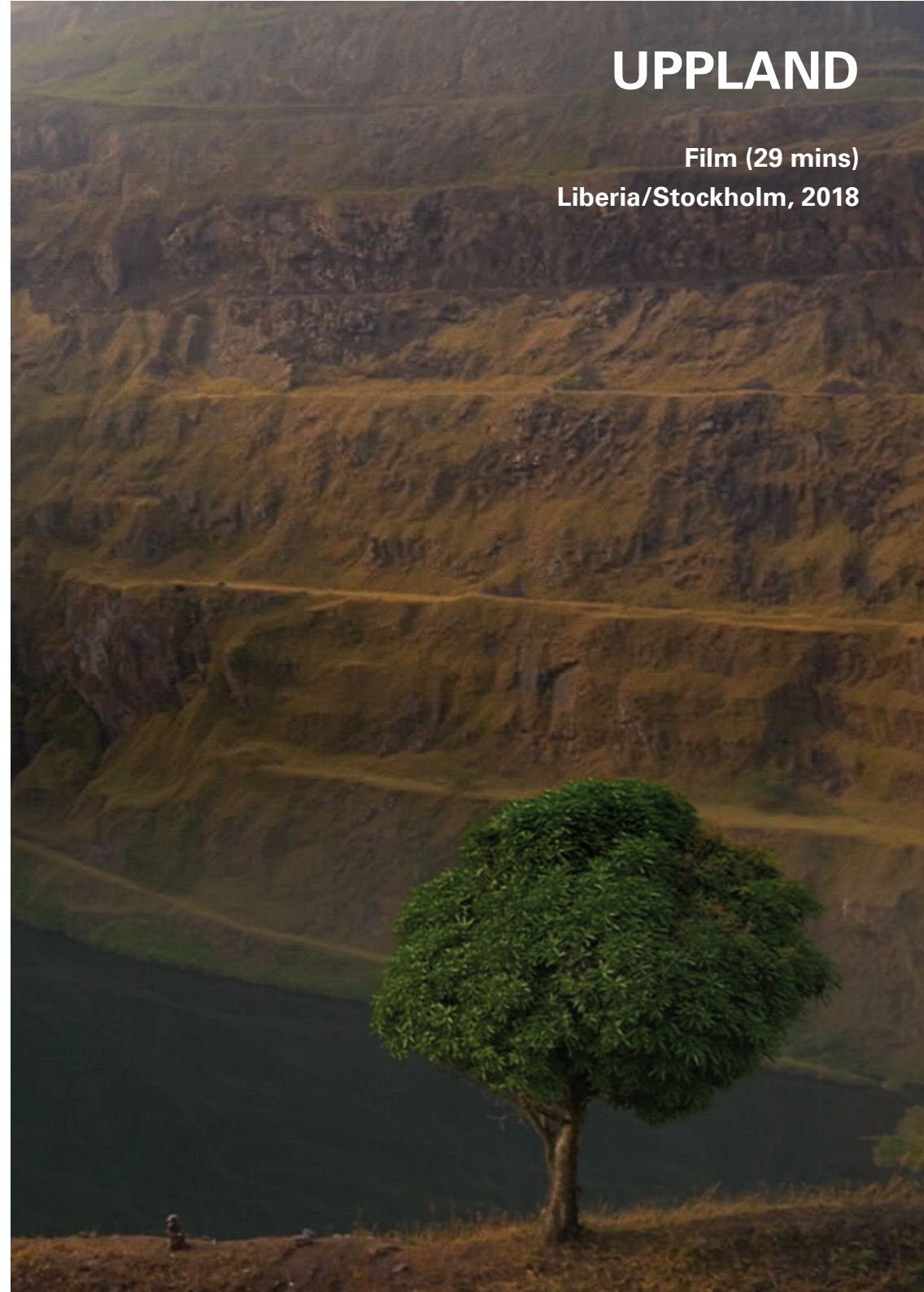
UPPLAND

Film (29 mins)

Liberia/Stockholm, 2018

Site Writing

Killian Doherty
PhD by Design



Still from 'Uppland'
2018



They told us they were going to do a survey

UPPLAND is a medium-length essay film - a collaboration with Scottish film-maker Edward Lawrenson – connecting urbanism, development and the extraction industry in West Africa, through a European new-town in Northern Liberia. The film tells the story of Yekepa, a new-town in Liberia, combining observational footage of the townscape today, oral testimony from present-day and historic residents, interviews with inhabitants, archive and voiceover. Since its release in 2018, the film has played to a large international general and specialist audience.

The new-town of Yekepa was built in the 1960s by a USA-Swedish iron-ore mining company to house its employees, designed along the lines of European high-modernist new-town. Built in remote Liberia, the town and its 'western architecture' became a symbol of the country's brief period of prosperity. In post-conflict, post-ebola Liberia Yekepa and its landscape lie empty but filled with utopian nostalgia and regret.

UPPLAND charts the historical alliances between western architecture and town planning and colonial violence that endure within contemporary economic visions of 'development'. The western modern architecture of Yekepa's builds upon Henri Lefebvre's metaphor for the new-town as the embodiment of all that is terrifying and intriguing about the economic, political and culturally violent logic of modernity.

Yekepa's urban transformation from rural landscape is also sited within contemporary struggles faced by non-western, particularly indigenous communities for equal rights to landscape and profits from resource exploitation. Much of the raw material demands for iron-ore at Yekepa is for the urbanisation of the Global North. Liberia's high-quality ore is today purchased and exported to China feeding urbanisation of Asian cities. Yekepa is today owned by Arcelor Mittal; the largest producers of structural steel – steel used for One Vanderbilt, the skyscraper under construction in Manhattan. UPPLAND builds upon Lefebvrian concerns about the production of space, through the urbanisation of capital, connecting the abstract scales of the global to the visible effacement of Liberian landscapes.

Prevailing/dominant discourses about urbanism and architecture overlook the range of conflicts (aesthetic, functional, cultural, environmental) that arise from outside intervention within non-western contexts. UPPLAND therefore challenges Eurocentric knowledge, through its exploration of the far-reaching and uneven consequences of urbanisation, moving towards a model of urban political ecology of theory and practice that promotes social and environmental equity.

In the context of anthropogenic change, UPPLAND explicates the costs of 'development', environmental and culturally, through the land-losses of local indigenous communities and broad disavowal of non-western identities and practices. UPPLAND explores the tensions between globalisation and locality, universalisation and specificity, stressing that whilst all of us are context-bound, some more context-bound than others.



Yekepa Swimming Pool,
Lamco Town,
Liberia, 1960



My area is here, and this is the swimming pool area here

Still image from
"Uppland" (2018)

Selected International Screenings

Cinema du réel, Pompidou Centre, March 2018

Venice Biennale Architettura, Lithuania Pavilion, June 2018

Open City Documentary Festival, London, September 2018

Kaunas International Film Festival, Lithuania, September 2018

Architecture Film Festival, Rotterdam, October 2018

Janela Internacional de Cinema, Recife, Brazil, November 2018

Cork Film Festival, Ireland, November

First Look 2019, Museum of Moving Image, New York, January 2019

Star and Shadow, Newcastle upon Tyne, May, 2019

Distribution

Grasshopper Film (Acquired by leading film label for North American non-theatrical distribution)

Images de la culture, Disseminated by the National Catalogue of Documentaries, CNC (France)

Press

Sight & Sound, Unfiction column by Michael Pattison, September 2018

Africa is a Country 'Ruins of a Mining Economy' by Danny Hoffman, May 2019.

Conferences / Presentations:

Irish Architecture Foundation, Dublin, 2016.

Centre for Public Interest Design, Portland State University, 2017.

Maryland Institute of Contemporary Art, 2016.

Chicago Architecture Foundation, 2017.

"Beyond Participation", Irish Architecture Foundation Conference, 2018

"Film in Place", panel discussion on film and architecture, Open City in association with UCL Urban Laboratory, September, 2018

"The Poetics and Politics of Extraction and the Environment". The Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship (University of Pretoria) and the Consortium for Humanities Centres and Institutes (University of Wisconsin), 2019



Sound
Recording,
Nimba Mine,
Liberia, 2016



Filming at Nimba Mine,
Liberia, 2016

Funding sources:

Open City Docs Dec 2015

Border Crossing Film-pitch development Award.

Arts Council Ireland, Engaging with Architecture, August 2017.

Bartlett Research Projects fund, Dec 2017.

Goldcrest film; in-kind donations for professional color 'grading' of film.

Key additional collaborators

Philippe Ciompi, sound design and mix

Sam Hooper, composer

Maya Maffioli, consultant editor

Research Methods include:

Desktop literature and archival review of Liberia and Yekepas' development; participant observation and interviews using 'Free, Prior and Informed Consent' methods; onsite audio-visual ethnography (i.e. sound-recordings, photography and moving image); script-writing; film editing and post-production; grant-writing.

Audience:

The film is of interest to Architects, Urban Planners, Landscape Architects, Anthropologists, Development Practitioners, Land Rights Advocacy groups, Mining Watchdog groups, Civil Society Groups, African interest groups.



Directed by Edward Lawrenson
Based on the research of Killian Doherty

UPPLAND

OPEN CITY
DOCUMENTARY
FESTIVAL

