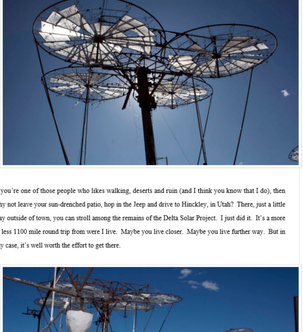
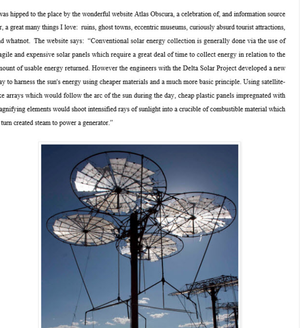
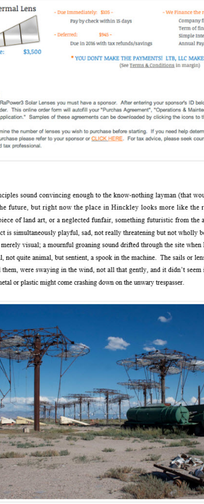
WE'LL CRINGE IN THE SUNSHINE



If you're one of those people who likes walking, deserts and ruin (and I think you know that I do), then why not leave your sun-drenched patio, hop in the Jeep and drive to Hinckley, in Utah? There, just a little way outside of town, you can stroll among the remains of the Delta Solar Project. I just did it. It's a more or less 1100 mile round trip from were I live. Maybe you live closer. Maybe you live further way. But in any case, it's well worth the effort to get there.



I was hipped to the place by the wonderful website Atlas Obscura, a celebration of, and information source for, a great many things I love: ruins, ghost towns, eccentric museums, curiously absurd tourist attractions, and whatnot. The website says: "Conventional solar energy collection is generally done via the use of fragile and expensive solar panels which require a great deal of time to collect energy in relation to the amount of usable energy returned. However the engineers with the Delta Solar Project developed a new way to harness the sun's energy using cheaper materials and a much more basic principle. Using satellite-like arrays which would follow the arc of the sun during the day, cheap plastic panels impregnated with magnifying elements would shoot intensified rays of sunlight into a crucible of combustible material which in turn created steam to power a generator."



Well, this begs a lot of questions, the first being (in my mind anyway) what exactly do they mean by "combustible material"? Coal? Animal dung? My less than exhaustive research suggests that one of the proposed materials was molten sodium, but I think there were others. RaPower3 Technology, who developed the idea, are still in business and their website talks enthusiastically about heat exchangers, jet-propulsion turbines, and photovoltaics (CPV). It also sounds as though they'd like you to invest some money with them. Maybe you'd like that too.

The principles sound convincing enough to the know-nothing layman (that would be me), and maybe this is the future, but right now the place in Hinckley looks more like the remnants of an overambitious piece of land art, or a neglected funfair, something futuristic from the age of wire and string. The effect is simultaneously playful, sad, not really threatening but not wholly benign. And the experience isn't merely visual; a mournful groaning sound drifted through the site when I was there, not quite mechanical, not quite animal, but sentient, a spook in the machine. The sails or lenses or whatever you want to call them, were swaying in the wind, not all that gently, and it didn't seem impossible that some chunk of metal or plastic might come crashing down on the unwary trespasser.

And once you looked more closely it seemed that the place wasn't so much ruined as simply abandoned, shrugged off, as though the technicians and the workers had got out of there in a hurry, leaving plenty of good stuff behind, a generator, a circular saw, construction materials, and a lot of vehicles, one of which was a crane marked as a vehicle belonging to the Marines.

As I was walking around the site, two pick up trucks arrived: one average size, one massive, and I wondered if somebody was coming to tell me to clear off, but no, the guys in the trucks were Mexicans, come to scavenge the site, and one of them waved to me in a cheerful way and I knew I wasn't going to get told off after all.

For all I know, RaPower3 Technology may be a viable solution to America's energy problems. Their version of solar power would supposedly take up far less land than the vast solar panel farms currently eating up vast expanses of the deserts of the American West. The Center for Land Use Interpretation (an L.A based, deadpan, ironic and surprisingly fun "research organization dedicated to the increase and diffusion of knowledge about how the nation's lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived") has been tracking these things, and the latest edition of their newsletter "The Lay of the Land" says that at current levels of efficiency solar panels would need to be covering 10,000 square miles of the landscape to take care of America's energy needs.

I've tried to love these solar farms but so far I've failed. They continue to strike me as a terrible desecration of the land. However, one thing I feel reasonably certain about sooner or later, by some method or other, these things will become obsolete, the technology will improve, smaller, more efficient solar farms will be able to get the job done. This sounds like a good thing, but it does raise the question of what will happen to all those occupied square miles. History suggests that not all energy producers are very keen on cleaning up after themselves. It's easy to imagine thousands of square miles of solar ruin. I hope I live long enough to be able to walk among them.

The Atlas Obscura website is here:
http://www.atlasobscura.com

The Center for Land Use Interpretation site is here:
http://clui.org/page/los-angeles