

Axioms for Reading the Landscape

Some Guides to the American Scene

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About the axioms and about cultural landscape

For most Americans, ordinary man-made landscape is something to be looked at, but seldom thought about. I am not talking here about "natural landscape," but about the landscape made by humans – what geographers call *cultural landscape*. Sometimes Americans may notice cultural landscape because they think it is pretty, or perhaps ugly; mostly they ignore the common vernacular scene. For most Americans, cultural landscape just *is*.

Usage of the word tells a good deal. As a common verb, to "landscape" means to "prettify." If a suburban lot is advertised as "landscaped," it is generally understood that somebody has fussed with the shrubbery on a small bit of ground, perhaps planted a few trees, and has manicured the bushes – more or less artfully. It rarely occurs to most Americans to think of landscape as including everything from city skylines to farmers' silos, from golf courses to garbage dumps, from ski slopes to manure piles, from millionaires' mansions to the tract houses of Levittown, from famous historical landmarks to flashing electric signs that boast the creation of the 20 billionth hamburger, from mossy cemeteries to sleazy shops that sell pornography next door to big city bus stations – in fact, whole countrysides, and whole cities, whether ugly or beautiful makes no difference. Although the word is seldom so used, it is proper and important to think of cultural landscape as nearly everything that we can see when we go outdoors. Such common workaday landscape has very little to do with the skilled work of landscape architects, but it has a great deal to say about the United States as a country and Americans as people.¹

At first, that idea sounds odd. The noun "landscape" evokes images of snow-capped mountains and waves beating on a rock-bound coast. But the fact remains that nearly every square millimeter of the United States has been altered by humankind somehow, at some time. "Natural landscapes" are as rare as unclimbed mountains, and for similar reasons. Mallory expressed a very American sentiment when he said he wanted to climb Everest because it was there. Americans tinker with landscape as if pursued by some inner demon, and they have been doing so ever since their ancestors landed at Jamestown and Plymouth and began chopping down trees. They continue today, and the sound of the power lawn mower is heard throughout the land.

All of this is obvious, but the implications are less obvious, though very simple, and very important to our understanding of the United States. The basic principle is this: *that all human landscape has cultural meaning*, no matter how ordinary that landscape may be. It follows, as Mae Thielgaard Watts has remarked, that we can "read the landscape" as we might read a book.² Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form. We rarely think of landscape that way, and so the cultural record we have "written" in the landscape is liable to be more truthful than most autobiographies because we are less self-conscious about how we describe ourselves. Grady Clay has said it well: "There are no secrets in the landscape."³ All our cultural warts and



FIG 1: Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, and all our cultural warts and blemishes, our ordinary day-to-day qualities, are there for anybody who knows how to look for them.

been edited and re-edited by people with illegible handwriting. Like books, landscapes *can* be read, but unlike books, they were not *meant* to be read.

In the second place, most Americans are unaccustomed to reading landscape. It has never occurred to them that it *can* be done, that there is reason to do so, much less that there is pleasure to be gained from it. That is one reason why so many Americans prefer driving on freeways with their bland highway-department roadsides, to driving on old-fashioned roads with their curves and crossroads and billboards and towns and irresponsible pedestrians and cyclists and straying livestock and roadside houses that spew forth children chasing balls – in short, all the things that make driving back roads interesting and hazardous. Very few academic disciplines teach their students how to read landscapes, or encourage them to try. Traditional geomorphology and traditional plant ecology (and one must, alas, stress “traditional” here) were two happy exceptions: these were disciplines which insisted that their practitioners use their eyes and *think* about what they saw, and it is no accident that some of America’s most accomplished landscape-readers, such as J. Hoover Mackin, Pierre Dansereau, and Mae Thielgaard Watts, derive from those fields.⁴ A few cultural geographers are also noteworthy. In America, much of the inspiration derived from Carl Sauer, who built the remarkable and influential “Berkeley School” in geography at the University of California, and whose students number some of the most accomplished landscape-readers in American professional geography.⁵ Fred Kniffen⁶ comes immediately to mind, as do Wilbur Zelinsky,⁷ David Lowenthal⁸ and James Parsons.⁹ One thinks, too, of the Minnesota geographers, John Fraser Hart,¹⁰ Cotton Mather, and Harry Swain.¹¹ But the list of geographers is not long. More often, you run across accomplished landscape-readers in unexpected places. J. B. Jackson, founder and longtime editor of *Landscape* magazine, diffidently disclaims association with any particular discipline; his work is dazzling and his influence (inside and outside academe) has been profound.¹² Henry Glassie, the folklorist and student of Kniffen, is another.¹³ George Stewart, one of the best, hung his academic hat in the English Department at Berkeley, and we are all the richer for it.¹⁴ Some journalists are among the most perceptive, perhaps because they spend their lives looking and writing about what they see,

blemishes are there, and our glories too; but above all, our ordinary day-to-day qualities are exhibited for anybody who wants to find them and knows how to look for them.

To be sure, reading landscapes is not as easy as reading books, and for two reasons. First, ordinary landscape seems messy and disorganized, like a book with pages missing, torn, and smudged; a book whose copy has

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