

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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.

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

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> Fred Kniffen<sup>6</sup> comes immediately to mind, as do Wilbur Zelinsky,<sup>7</sup> David Lowenthal<sup>8</sup> and James Parsons.<sup>9</sup> One thinks, too, of the Minnesota geographers, John Fraser Hart,<sup>10</sup> Cotton Mather, and Harry Swain.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> Henry Glassie, the folklorist and student of Kniffen, is another.<sup>13</sup> George Stewart, one of the best, hung his academic hat in the English Department at Berkeley, and we are all the richer for it.<sup>14</sup> Some journalists are among the most perceptive, perhaps because they spend their lives looking and writing about what they see,

no matter how trivial the subject may seem. Tom Wolfe argues that police-reporters of the old school are among our most potent social analysts – the old fellows in battered felt hats who walked through life with the wide eyes of cynical children, noting everything in a curiously innocent way, and writing about what they saw.<sup>15</sup> But it remains a sad fact that most academics in those fields where we might expect to find expert landscape-reading are egregiously inept. To be sure, there are glorious exceptions – people like Alan Gowans, Reyner Banham, and Grady Clay – but they remain exceptions nonetheless.<sup>16</sup>

So unless one is lucky enough to have studied with a plant ecologist like Dansereau, a geomorphologist like Mackin, a folklorist like Glassie, or simply a Renaissance man like Jackson, one is likely to need guidance. To "read landscape," to make cultural sense of the ordinary things that constitute the workaday world of things we see, most of us need help.

I took a long time learning that fact. Years ago, when I started teaching about cultural landscapes of the United States, I was puzzled and annoyed that students seemed so obtuse. They seemed blind to all that marvelous material around them, and even worse, some of them seemed insulted when they were told to go outdoors and use their eyes and think about what they saw. Gradually, I realized that the students were not obtuse; *I* was. The students were simply aping the great majority of their faculty mentors, who by their inattention to ordinary landscape were teaching the students very effectively that landscape didn't matter: that serious students did not deal with trivial questions about ordinary everyday things, such as what Howard Johnson's cupolas were meant to symbolize, or why people put pink plastic flamingos in their front yards.

What we needed, I concluded, were some guides to help us read the landscape, just as the rules of grammar sometimes help guide us through some particularly convoluted bit of syntax. Little by little, I began to write down some of the rules that I discovered over the years of looking and learning and teaching about American landscapes and which I found helped me understand what I saw. I call these rules "axioms," because they now seem basic and self-evident, as any proper axiom must be. I may be wrong in using the word "axiom": what seems self-evident now was not obvious to me a few years ago. But call them what you will: They are nevertheless essential ideas that underlie the reading of America's cultural landscape.

### *The Axioms*

1. THE AXIOM OF LANDSCAPE AS CLUE TO CULTURE *The man-made landscape – the ordinary run-of-the-mill things that humans have created and put upon the earth – provides strong evidence of the kind of people we are, and were, and are in process of becoming.* In other words, the culture of any nation is unintentionally reflected in its ordinary vernacular landscape.

THE COROLLARY OF CULTURAL CHANGE Our human landscape – our houses, roads, cities, farms, and so on – represents an enormous investment of money, time, and emotions. People will not change that landscape unless they are under very heavy pressure to do so. We must conclude that if there is really major change in the *look* of the cultural landscape, then there is very likely a major change occurring in our national culture at the same time.

THE REGIONAL COROLLARY If one part of the country (or even one part of a city) *looks* substantially different from some other part of the country (or city), then the chances are very good that the cultures of the two places are different also. Thus, much of the South looks different from the rest of the country, not only because the climate and vegetation are different, but also because some important parts of Southern culture really *are* different from the rest of the country, although not necessarily in the way that some propagandists would like us to think. So also, black ghettos in Northern cities look different from adjacent white slums, because the culture of such ghettos remains distinctive.

THE COROLLARY OF CONVERGENCE To the degree that the look of two areas comes to be more and more alike, one may surmise that the cultures are also converging. Thus many small Southern towns look quite different from their Northern counterparts, while Atlanta looks more and more like the "standard" Northern city, and even something like Phoenix, which is perhaps

American's most super-American city. One may properly conclude that the cultural rift between North and South is growing narrower, but the process of reunion is taking place faster in urban places than in rural ones, and fastest of all in the suburbs.

To take another example: black suburbs of Northern cities look increasingly like white suburbs, and the shacks of rural Southern blacks are simultaneously being replaced by replicas of the "ranchettes" of exurban Northern whites. It may be legitimate to speculate that such convergence of landscapes represents some real convergence of cultures and perhaps some lessening of racial tensions.

**THE COROLLARY OF DIFFUSION** The look of a landscape often is changed by imitation. That is, people in one place see what is happening elsewhere, like it, and imitate it if possible. The timing and location of such imitative changes are governed by various forms of geographic and social diffusion, which are surprisingly predictable, and which tell us a good deal about the way that cultural ideas spread and change. For example, Greek Revival architecture spread from Virginia into upstate New York in the early nineteenth century and from there, in debased form, to other parts of the country. Both the spread and the debasement took nearly a century to complete.<sup>17</sup> Now, in the 1970s, California landscape tastes are widely and wildly imitated in most parts of the country. The delay between California invention and Eastern imitation is extremely small – sometimes almost instantaneous.



Fig. 2: Much of our ordinary landscape reflects vagaries of fashion and taste which may be rapidly and widely diffused. Why does a pseudo-Spanish mission-style building show up on an automobile row in Syracuse, New York? (P.J. Huggill)

**THE COROLLARY OF TASTE** Different cultures possess different *tastes* in cultural landscape; to understand the roots of taste is to understand much of the culture itself.

While most people admit they have "taste" in landscape, and in fact would insist they do, they often claim that their tastes are based on "practical" grounds. That is ludicrously untrue in most instances. A huge amount of our day-to-day behavior and the landscapes created by that

behavior is dictated by the vagaries of "fashion" or "taste" or "fad." And when we speak of "taste," we are talking about *culture* – not about practicality.<sup>18</sup>

At first glance, some fads seem trivial, like hula-hooping or skateboarding: apparent eccentricities that sweep the country and then are gone. But what guides those fads? Are they really so different from the deep-seated cultural biases that anthropologists and cultural geographers take so seriously: dietary "laws" that encourage us to eat the meat of steers and chickens, and produce nausea at the thought of eating rats and snakes? Why do we build domes and spires on public buildings, but rarely on our houses? Why did lightning rods suddenly appear on the American scene, and then disappear except as antiques? Why do we plant our front yards to grass, water it to make it grow, mow it to keep it from growing too much, and impose fines on those who fail to mow often enough? (Why not let the dandelions grow, or pour concrete instead?)

(Occasionally people do just that, and are ostracized by their neighbors.) At best, the answers to these questions are subtle, fascinating, and often very hard to get. At worst, we simply have no answers at all. But we know enough about taste to know that it is a powerful cultural force (avoiding rat-eating, for example), and those tastes do not come about by accident. Indeed, to trace the paths of taste through historic time and across geographical space tells us a good deal about the nature of American cultures: what it is, and how it got to be the way it is.

Thus, if we ask why America's human landscapes look the way they do, it may seem that we are asking simple-minded questions. In fact, we are also asking: Why do Americans possess certain tastes and not others? We are asking where those tastes came from and why they take hold in certain times and disappear at others.

2. THE AXIOM OF CULTURAL UNITY AND LANDSCAPE EQUALITY *Nearly all items in human landscapes reflect culture in some way. There are almost no exceptions. Furthermore, most items in the human landscape are no more and no less important than other items - in terms of their role as clues to culture.*

Thus, the MacDonalD's hamburger stand is just as important a cultural symbol (or clue) as the Empire State Building, and the change in design of MacDonalD's buildings may signal an important change in cultural attitudes, just as the rash of Seagram's "shoebox skyscrapers" around exurban freeway interchanges heralds the arrival of a new kind of American city – and a new variant of American culture. So also the painted cement jockeyboy on the front lawn in lower middle-class suburbia is just as important as a symbol as the Brooklyn Bridge; the Coney Island roller rink is as important as the Washington Monument – no more, no less.

This axiom parallels an equally basic proposition: that culture is *whole* – a unity – like an iceberg with many tips protruding above the surface of the water. Each tip looks like a different iceberg, but each is in fact part of the same object. The moral is plain: no matter how ordinary it may seem, there's no such thing as a culturally uninteresting landscape.

But note these caveats:

a. If an item is really unique (like the only elephant-shaped hotel south of the 40th parallel, located in Margate, New Jersey), it may not seem to mean much, except that its creator was rich and crazy.

b. *However*, one should not be too hasty in judging something "unique." That elephant-shaped hotel has many close relatives: giant artichokes in Castroville, California; billboards that blow smoke rings in Times Square. In some circles such things are called "camp" or "pop" or "kitsch," and it is fashionable to snicker at them. But ridicule or deprecation cannot dismiss the persistent, nagging and fascinating question: what do these ordinary things tell us about American culture?<sup>19</sup>

c. The fact that all items are equally important emphatically does *not* mean that they are equally easy to study and understand (cf. Axiom 7). Sometimes the commonest things are the hardest to study; which leads us to...

3. THE AXIOM OF COMMON THINGS *Common landscapes – however important they may be – are by their nature hard to study by conventional academic means.* The reason is negligence, combined with snobbery. One has no trouble finding excellent books about famous buildings like Monticello or famous symbolic structures like the Brooklyn Bridge.<sup>20</sup> Curious antique objects get a lot of attention too: "olde" spinning wheels and "Olde" Williamsburg. But it is hard to find intelligent writing which is neither polemical nor self-consciously cute on such subjects as mobile homes, motels, gas stations, shopping centers, billboards, suburban tract housing design, the look of fundamentalist churches, watertowers, city dumps, garages and car-ports. Yet such things are found nearly everywhere Americans have set foot, and they obviously reflect the way ordinary Americans think and behave most of the time. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that we have perversely overlooked a huge body of evidence which – if approached carefully and

studied without aesthetic or moral prejudice – can tell us a great deal about what kinds of people Americans are, were, and may become.<sup>21</sup>

THE COROLLARY OF NONACADEMIC LITERATURE Happily, not all American writers, nor foreign visitors, are as snooty as American scholars. Even though there is little written about motels and fast-foot eateries in the "standard" scholarly literature, the country is awash with fascinating and useful material about these common items. One merely has to look in the right place. Some of the "right places" include:

a. Writings of the "new journalists," like Tom Wolfe, who reflect with devastating accuracy on such things as the landscape of drag racing, Las Vegas billboards, the architecture of surfing (including surfers' arcane haircuts), and above all, the cultural contexts from which such landscapes spring.<sup>22</sup>

b. Trade journals, written for people who make money from vernacular landscapes. If, for example, you want to know why your local franchised hamburger joint looks the way it does, try browsing through the pages of the journal *Fast Food*. The magazine is intended for and read by a very select audience of restaurateurs and investors, and it contains advice to help its readers get rich as fast as possible. Large sections of the journal deal with such matters as the workings of space-age ovens that fry quarter-pound hamburgers instantly, but nestled among the technical esoteria, the student of vernacular landscape can find a treasury of cultural information. There is remarkably candid advice on restaurant design that has been road tested to catch the traveler's eye: outdoor signs and landscaping formulas that are based on cool, even chilly appraisals of American popular taste, a matter that lies at the very roots of culture. Then too, trade journals often contain a page or two of "political news" (often called something like "Washington Hotline") which report on political and legal matters of importance to the industry in question. Thus, a trade journal for highway engineers and road contractors, *Rural and Urban Roads* (previously called *Better Roads*), reports on congressional hearings which may result in new laws which will in turn determine what our road systems and roadsides will look like for years to come. The journal often urges subscribers to support legislation that has not even been written yet, and it suggests ways to promote that legislation by influencing politicians, inserting "plugs" in the popular press, and generally engaging in what is politely termed "PR".

For the would-be landscape-reader – one who is neither restaurateur nor highway engineer – browsing through those trade journals can be disconcerting. It is rather like stumbling accidentally across a highly classified document that outlines detailed plans for a military invasion across home territory. Not only does one learn what our future landscapes may look like, one learns in advance about some of the methods by which they may be created. It is not often that scholars in any field have such a chance to look into the future.

Trade journals, especially the old, established ones, can usually be trusted for their cultural judgments. (If their appraisals are wrong too often, they simply do not stay in business.) There are hundreds, indeed thousands, of such journals, and they are not hard to find.<sup>23</sup>

c. Advertisements for commercial products. One need not speculate very long to identify the strain in the American psyche that the obviously successful ad-makers for Marlboro cigarettes are trying to touch. By whatever name it is called, Marlboro's wild-west country has a very real place in America's collective landscape tastes, and those tastes emerge in some very real places: fire departments that look like pueblos in the suburbs of Buffalo, New York; "Western stores" in eastern Louisiana; and "desert lawns" (replete with sand, cactus, bleached wood, and longhorn skulls) spread from arid Tucson to the foggy shores of San Francisco Bay.<sup>24</sup> Old advertisements are equally valuable, for they speak volumes about past technology, past taste, and past cultures. In the same way, old illustrations, picture postcards, or photographs may serve similar purposes.



Fig. 3: A large part of the common American landscape was built by people in the past, whose tastes, habits, technology, wealth, and ambitions were different from ours. Southern Illinois. (P.F. Lewis)

d. Promotional travel literature, often in the form of slick brochures that tell you not very subtly what you are supposed to see when you visit certain places. Recent changes in the landscape of the Pocono Plateau, for example, are much easier to understand after one has seen the marginal eroticism in brochures that beckon newlyweds to any of several Pocono

"honeymoon retreats." Indeed, travel literature can *act* as an agent of landscape change. Much of New Orleans's French Quarter, for example, has been "upgraded" and sanitized so that it would accord with tourists' expectations. Those expectations, of course, largely derive from advertising which has been directed at the tourist himself. The advertisement thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

e. The rare book by a perceptive person who has looked intently at a landscape and discovered what it means. If one really wants to understand what Americans are doing and thinking and aspiring to, sample the glories of George Stewart's *U.S. 40: Cross-section of the United States of America* (1953)<sup>25</sup> or Grady Clay's superb *Close-up: How to Read the American City* (1973)<sup>26</sup> Almost anything by J. B. Jackson will do the job nicely, although "The Stranger's Path" is especially perceptive.<sup>27</sup>

4. THE HISTORIC AXIOM *In trying to unravel the meaning of contemporary landscapes and what they have to "say" about us as Americans, history matters.* That is, we do what we do, and make what we make because our doings and our makings are inherited from the past. (We are a good deal more conservative than many of us would like to admit.) Furthermore, a large part of the common American landscape was built by people in the past, whose tastes, habits, technology, wealth, and ambitions were different than ours today. Thus, while we live among obsolete artifacts of past times – "old-fashioned houses" and "obsolete cities" and "inefficient transportation" or "bad plumbing" – those objects were not seen to be "inefficient" or silly by the people who made them, or caused them to be made. To understand those objects, we must try to understand the people who built them – our cultural ancestors – in *their* cultural context, not ours.

THE COROLLARY OF HISTORIC LUMPINESS Most major cultural change does not occur gradually, but instead in great sudden historic leaps, commonly provoked by such great events as wars, depressions, and major inventions. After these leaps, landscape is likely to look very different than it did before. Inevitably, however, a lot of "pre-leap" landscape will be left lying around, even though its reason for being has disappeared. Thus, the Southern landscape is

littered with share-croppers' houses, even though the institution of sharecropping has nearly disappeared – a victim of the boll weevil and a concatenation of other forces that combined to destroy the old Cotton Belt of the early 1900s, and provoked a migration of black farmers northward, eventually to change the entire urban landscape of industrial America. Most small towns in America – at least of the Norman Rockwell ilk – are like the Cotton Belt: obsolete relicts of a different age. There are no more being built today, and, unless things in America change radically, there never will be.

THE MECHANICAL (OR TECHNOLOGICAL) COROLLARY To understand the cultural significance of a landscape or an element of the landscape, it is helpful (and often essential) to know in *particular* about the *mechanics* of technology and communications that made the element possible.

For example, we can speculate endlessly (and often pointlessly) about the “symbolism” of, say, the American front lawn, made of mown green grass: perhaps it is a status symbol reflecting a borrowing from England, and thus a subliminal reflection of our admiration for things English. But much of that “symbolic speculation” is likely to be hot air unless we really know how a lawn works in a very mechanical way. The fact that most of us have direct experience with lawns, planting and mowing and fertilizing and irrigating and cursing them, obscures two important facts: 1. We do many mechanical things to establish and maintain a lawn that we take for granted (such as getting the lawnmower serviced), but which are nonetheless essential and that would baffle people from lawnless societies. Except for companies like the Scott Grass Seed Co., nobody bothers to write about such behavior, commonplace as it is. 2. We need to know who invented the machinery to make the lawn possible: who took that invention and engineered the machinery so that it came within the financial reach of Everyman (invention and engineering are emphatically not the same thing); who adopted the machinery; how the idea spread; and above all, *when* all this happened and in what order; and *where* these events took place and how they spread, often in direct defiance of environmental good sense. (Why are there green lawns all over Sun City, Arizona, for example? And why, only recently, the sudden efflorescence – if one may call it that – of those “desert lawns” throughout the West?)

All that, of course, is a big order for something so commonplace as the American lawn. Yet pause and consider what we are really discussing. Every step of the way we are investigating the evolution of American culture: where things started, when, and how. The key work is how, for unless one knows about the technology behind the landscape element we are concerned with, the fact remains that we really know very little about it. Speculation about symbolisms will remain unprofitable.<sup>28</sup>

5. THE GEOGRAPHIC (OR ECOLOGIC) AXIOM *Elements of a cultural landscape make little cultural sense if they are studied outside their geographic (i.e., locational) context.*

To a large degree, cultures dictate that certain activities should occur in certain places, and only in those places. Thus, all modern American cities are segregated: streetwalkers are not found throughout the city, nor are green lawns, trees, high buildings, or black people. This axiom is so obvious that it should not have to be mentioned, except that so many scholars and “practical” people persistently flout it. Architectural historians publish books full of handsome photographs of “important buildings,” artfully composed so that the viewer will not see the “less important” building next door, much less the telephone wires overhead or the gas station across the street. The “important building” is disembodied, as if on an architect’s easel in a windowless studio somewhere. So also, planners make grand schemes to improve sections of existing cities, plans drawn on large blank sheets of paper, with adjacent areas shown in vague shades of gray or not shown at all, as if the planning district existed *in vacuo*. The planners are perplexed when residents of those gray areas rise up in anger, and perplexity turns to frustration when city councils send the elegant plans back to rest ignominiously in a file drawer, full of similar material, rejected from the past. Again and again, historic preservationists throw up white picket fences around “historic buildings,” while adjacent neighborhoods go to ruin. Inside is “history”; outside, it isn’t history.<sup>29</sup> (Then we wonder why the general public equates historic preservation with Disneyland!) To study a building as if it were on an artist’s easel, detached from its surrounding,

is to remove some of the most important evidence explaining why the building looks the way it does, and what its appearance has to tell us about the culture in which it was built.

It is easy to understand why buildings (for example) are isolated for study outside their geographic surroundings. It is what scientists call a "simplifying assumption," and it makes things easier for the student. So, the epidemiologist studies a deadly microbe in an antiseptic pan of agar so that he can see how the bug behaves in isolation. Thus, he meets the bug. But he knows enough to realize that the microbe is important only *in context*, because it causes the disease in a larger body; in this instance, the environment of the human body. So it is with houses and barns and lawns and sidewalks and any other "item" in the landscape: to make sense of them, one must observe them in context.

6. THE AXIOM OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL *Most cultural landscapes are intimately related to physical environment. Thus, the reading of cultural landscape also presupposes some basic knowledge of physical landscape.*

We often boast that we have "conquered geography," meaning that contemporary technology is so powerful that we can build anything, wherever we like, and effectively ignore climate, landforms, soils, and the like. To be sure, we grow tomatoes in greenhouses all winter long, and Pennsylvanians flee to Florida when their native winters grow excessively obnoxious. We send men to the moon, and we build superhighways almost anywhere we want.

But "conquering geography" is often very expensive business. Compare the price of tomatoes in January with the price in August (and compare the quality, too!), or contrast the cost per mile of a cross-town expressway in New York with one across North Dakota prairies. In earlier simpler times, with less money, less sophisticated tools, and less information, "conquering geography" was even more expensive, and people avoided such extravagance whenever they could. Thus, the South differed culturally from the North largely because it differed physically. Southern cities stopped looking Southern about the time that cheap air conditioning made it possible to ignore the debilitating heat of a super-tropical summer, which lasted sometimes for five months, a season in which nobody who could help it did any work between noon and 7 P.M. The "Southern way of life" was renamed "the Atlanta spirit" and began to take on Yankee ways, largely because of air conditioning. Then the Arabs tripled the price of oil, and suddenly air conditioning became "uneconomical." Sitting on verandahs came back into style, and glass-lined offices in high-rise skyscrapers with windows that wouldn't open were seen as something less than Paradise on an August afternoon. Environment continues to matter after all.

7. THE AXIOM OF LANDSCAPE OBSCURITY *Most objects in the landscape – although they convey all kinds of "messages" – do not convey those messages in any obvious way. The landscape does not speak to us very clearly. At a very minimum, one must know what kinds of questions to ask.*

As for asking questions, one can quickly get into the habit of asking them simply by doing so. What does it look like? How does it work? Who designed it? Why? When? What does it tell us about the way our society works? (It is remarkable how many intelligent perceptive people have never asked questions of the landscape, simply because nobody ever suggested they do it.)

As for the answers, and judging their validity, that is a trickier matter. Many historians, geographers, and others will ask the obvious question: "If you want to interpret American culture, why not simply read books about it? Why use landscape as evidence, especially when you have already admitted that the interpretation of cultural landscape is such a slippery uncertain enterprise?"

There are two answers to this not-so-simple question:

1. Many of the books are not yet written. For example, I know of no satisfactory book about the landscape of recreation in America despite the fact that we spend billions of dollars on recreation every year, that in many places it is the chief source of revenue, and that most Americans spend huge chunks of time either having fun or thinking about it. To be sure, there is no dearth of books about "recreation planning" – solemn tomes about parks and playgrounds – but if one wants to know about how American tastes have changed through time, one finds the bookshelves nearly empty.<sup>30</sup> Visible evidence is nearly all we have; however, the visible evidence is plentiful: everything from abandoned amusement parks to Little League baseball fields to the

little signs stuck on telephone poles in Minnesota and upstate New York that admit that snowmobiles have priority in much of the Northland in winter and thereby admit existence of a subculture that did not exist a decade ago.

2. Many books about certain important subjects (e.g., why American houses look the way they do) disagree with each other, and not in minor ways, either. One must conclude that somebody is not telling the whole truth. The most immediate way to resolve such disagreement is to go back to the real thing (in this case, the house itself). The chances are excellent that part, if not all, of the difficulty can be cleared up by visible evidence (and we will begin to have a growing suspicion that many authors have never looked closely at what they write about).

One can, of course, claim too much for the virtues of landscape-reading. It is not a panacea, not the master key to an understanding of culture. Indeed, it may be no more than a diverting game, because it is pleasant to go outdoors and let your eyes roam idly across some nice bit of scenery and tell yourself that you are engaged in research. (Landscape-reading will not put libraries out of business.)

One can, however, quite literally teach oneself how to see,<sup>31</sup> and that is something that most Americans have not done and should do.<sup>32</sup> To be sure, neither looking by itself, nor reading by itself is likely to give us very satisfactory answers to the basic cultural questions that landscape poses. But the alternation of looking, and reading, and thinking, and then looking and reading again, can yield remarkable results, if only to raise questions we had not asked before. Indeed, that alternation may also teach us more than we had ever dreamed: that there is order in the landscape where we had seen only bedlam before. That may not be the road to salvation, but it may be the road to sanity.

### Notes

1. I am talking about Americans in this essay because I am an American and know my countrymen better than the citizens of any other nation. (I may also be talking about Canadians or Australians too, but they can decide that better than I.) But to talk about America is to talk with some meaning for a larger world. American traits and American landscapes are imitated by other nations, not so much because the traits are American, but because sophisticated technology is at popular disposal more commonly in America than in most parts of the world to produce some very comfortable living. Many dislike the usage, of course, but in some places, the word "American" serves as shorthand for "modern-efficient-comfortable."

2. See Mae Thielgaard Watts, *Reading the Landscape: An Adventure in Ecology* (New York: Macmillan, 1957) Republished (1975) as *Reading the Landscape of America*. See esp. the last chapter, "The Stylish House; or Fashions as an Ecological Factor," where she traces the career of a New England cottage from its construction in the early 19th century to the present, showing how changes in the house, its landscaping, and its residents (all named and numbered, even unto the dog, Fido) kept up with fashions from generation to generation. For a succinct, beautifully illustrated history of domestic middle-class American tastes, I know of nothing like it. Both writing and drawing are inspired. A similar delight awaits in her reading *Reading the Landscape of Europe*, published in Britain as *The Countryside Around You* (London: Cassel, 1973), which opens with a marvelous, illustrated prologue, "Reading the Rooflines of Europe."

3. Grady Clay, *Close-up: How to Read the American City* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

4. J. Hoover Mackin, late Professor of Geomorphology at the University of Washington and Texas, is internationally known for his epochal essay, "Concept of the Graded River," *Bulletin, Geol. Soc. of America* (1948):463 – 512. His students – now strewn across the world – remember him best for his virtuoso courses in topographic map interpretation, and in field geomorphology. Mackin simply demanded that his students use their eyes and attach them to their brains, and had no patience for those who refused to learn.

Pierre Dansereau, distinguished retired dean of the College of Science at the University of Montreal, and sometime Assistant Curator of the New York Botanical Garden, was fortunately on the botany faculty at the University of Michigan when I was a puling infant of a graduate student in 1951. He is internationally known for his works in ecology, botany, and metropolitan planning, but I knew him first in his course, "Vegetations of the World," in which I enrolled almost accidentally – surely one of the happiest accidents of my academic life. His lecture, comparing the look of English, French, Brazilian, and American gardens, and how those domestic gardens reflect national culture, caused scales to fall from my eyes in great clattering heaps. For all his prolific writing, he has unaccountably never written the lecture down for publication. Meantime, I take solace in two of Dansereau's brief essays, which reveal his remarkable perspicacity: "The Barefoot Scientist," *Colorado Quarterly* 12 (1962):101-15; and "New Zealand Revisited," *Garden Journal* 12 (1962):1-6. The latter essay, a combination of botanical observation, personal reflection, and acute social observation, reminds me delightedly of Charles Lyell's accounts of his travels in the American South in 1841 – 42. Both represent a tradition of scientist-cum-traveler, a la Teilhard de Chardin, that requires a combination of gentility and intelligence that is all too rare in our contemporary scientific community.

5. Sauer's influence was so pervasive and eclectic that it would be wrong to tag him with the label "landscape-reader." In fact, Sauer's impact on landscape-readers was felt more through the work of his students than through his voluminous writings. For an appreciation of Sauer as teacher see Dan Stanislawski, "Carl Ortwin Sauer, 1889-1975," *Journal of Geography* 74 (1975):548-54.

6. Professor Kniffen has been writing and teaching indefatigably for forty years. Perhaps his most influential professional writing is "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers 55 (1965): 549-77.
7. Like most members of the Berkeley school, Zelinsky is a prolific and eclectic writer, who is not easy to categorize. Some of his admirers would doubtless turn to *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), for an example of Zelinsky's breadth of interest. For Zelinsky-as-landscape-reader, however, I would nominate a lovely little thing, "Where the South Begins: The Northern Limit of the Cis-Appalachian South in Terms of Settlement Landscape," *Social Forces* 30 (1959): 172 – 78.
8. Lowenthal is as prolific as Zelinsky. See "The American Scene," *Geographical Review*, 58 (1968): 61-88, a thoughtful essay about why America looks the way it does and what that look has to say about our national character.
9. Parsons, one of Sauer's successors as chairman of the Geography Department at Berkeley, would doubtless disclaim the proud title of "landscape-reader," but I know better. He is – his students tell me – at his best with a small class, driving at breakneck speed along Interstate Five in the San Joaquin Valley, discoursing on the changing agricultural landscape that most travelers between Sacramento and Los Angeles find incomprehensible and (therefore) dull. For an eloquent statement of Parsons's views on "the significance and rewards of field observation," see "Geography as Exploration and Discovery," his presidential address to the Association of American Geographers, *Annals*, Association of American Geographers 67 (1977): 1-16.
10. Hart's real passion is rural America, and his most comprehensive work on the subject is *The Look of the Land*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1974).
11. Most "geographic field guides" are guaranteed to provoke instant ennui. For a splendid exception see Swain and Mather's *St. Croix Border Country* (Prescott, Wis.: Pierce Country Geographical Society, 1968), an amusing and perceptive guide to the borderland of a growing metropolis.
12. Jackson founded the journal *Landscape* in 1951, and it was Jackson's personal testament until he retired in 1968. Those who love the American landscape and love trying to understand it owe him an incalculable debt, for *Landscape* helped teach a generation of neophyte geographers that there was nothing disreputable about going outdoors and asking naive questions about what one saw. More than a dozen of Jackson's wonderful essays are collected in *Landscapes: Selected Writings of J. B. Jackson*, ed., Ervin H. Zube (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970). Some of Jackson's greatest coups, however, appear as unsigned notes and comments, published intermittently in *Landscape* during the halcyon days of his editorship in the 1950s and 1960s; see Meinig's review in the concluding essay of this book.
13. Glassie has the rare ability to combine painstaking research with lively writing. He has produced altogether some of the most interesting material in American folklore today. His most accessible work, and most sweeping in scope, is *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Get the 1971 paperback edition; the 1968 hardback has no index and needs one badly.
14. George Stewart, *U.S. 40: Cross Section of the United States of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), is one of the single best books about the United States. It is a combination of plain English and plain photography – breathtaking in clarity and content.
15. Wolfe made this remark in a public lecture at the Pennsylvania State University, University Park, in January 1976.
16. Alan Gowans, *Images of American Living: Four Centuries of Architecture and Furniture as Cultural Expression* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1964). Gowans is an architectural historian, and his book is a tour de force. Gowans was born a Canadian and, like many who are not American-born, sees the United States a good deal more clearly than most Americans do. Gowans has a similar book on Canada: *Building Canada: An Architectural History of Canadian Life* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1964). Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of the Four Ecotogies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), is the first and only book I have read that makes genuine sense of Los Angeles and why it looks the way it does. (For what it is worth, Banham's book made me shed all my academic-chic prejudices against Los Angeles, and look at that superb city with new eyes.) It is the best single book on an American city I have read. Banham, another architectural historian, is British, and his nationality forces one, I fear, to draw the same conclusion as one draws from the works and origin of Alan Gowans. Grady Clay (see Note 3) is *mirabile dictu*, American-born. Editor of *Landscape Architecture Quarterly*, Clay is both landscape architect and journalist, a happy combination.
17. Peirce Lewis, "Common Houses, Cultural Spoor," *Landscape* 19 (January 1975): 1 – 2.
18. Russell Lynes elaborates this idea with wit and intelligence in *The Tastemakers* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1949).
19. Caution! If a scholar starts studying elephant-shaped hotels, he is likely to be denounced, or ridiculed, or pointedly ignored by self-styled "serious scholars," who will dismiss him as doing work that is "trivial" or "irrelevant." Students of landscape must learn to ignore such folk, or they will end up paranoid. The critics are more to be pitied than censured, since they see that other people are having fun, and they probably aren't. It's a sad fact – but nonetheless a fact – that many academics don't consider it respectable to enjoy their scholarship. But life is too short to worry about people like that, so keep your eyes open, and remember that you're trying to understand nothing less serious (or less funny) than American culture.
20. The volume of printed material about the Brooklyn Bridge must equal that of the bridge itself. The beginner might try David McCullough, *The Great Bridge: The Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972). McCullough's book is a panoramic portrait of American life during the two decades the bridge was abuilding: economic, technology, politics, social mores, urban history – almost nothing is not touched on. It is, in fact, a kind of cultural ecology of the bridge. Bridges, of course, are mighty symbols in this mobile society. The best general work is David Plowden, *Bridges: The Spans of North America* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), technically irreproachable, and undergirded with the kinds of photographs that have made Plowden justly famous as one of the most sensitive contemporary photographers in America. If we had an encyclopedia of volumes to match Plowden's on other topics in the vernacular landscape there would be no need for me or anyone else to complain about inattention to ordinary elements of ordinary landscapes.
21. Scholars have been complaining about such neglect for a long time. See, e.g., Reyner Banham "The Missing Motel," *Landscape* 15 (1965): 4 – 6. Nevertheless, scholars continue to chip away at the monolithic indifference. The Winter 1976

issue of *Landscape* contains a fine succinct essay on the origin and evolution of garages and carports in the U. S. by J. B. Jackson.

22. Aficionados will differ on what constitutes real vintage Wolfe. For Wolfe-as-landscape-analyst, my preference is the essay on Las Vegas signs in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1965). For Wolfe-as-social-observer, he reaches Mark Twainian levels in *his Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak-Catchers* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1970).

23. *Ulrich's International Periodical's Dictionary* lists a bewildering variety of journals – trade and otherwise. In some instances, however, a bit of legwork will yield better results. If you want *the* authoritative trade journal on, say, the motel industry, just drop by the nearest prosperous-looking motel and ask the manager if you can see his copy. You can be sure he subscribes, and equally sure that he will talk your ear off about motel management, if he has the time.

24. Melvin E. Hecht, "The Decline of the Grass Lawn Tradition in Tucson," *Landscape* 19 (1975):3-10.

25. See Note 14.

26. See Note 3.

27. The essay is reprinted in Zube, *Landscapes*.

28. For an astonishing variety of information about American technology and its social context, see J.C. Furnas, *The Americans: A Social History of the U.S., 1589 – 1914* (New York: Putnam's 1969). Furnas covers a wonderful range of topics, cites a formidable bibliography and, unlike the standard history of technology with its concern with inventors, pays special heed to the effects of technological innovation, and the social effects of successful invention.

29. David Lowenthal, "The American Way of History," *Columbia Univ. Forum* 9 (1966): 27 – 32; "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," *Geographical Review* 65 (1975):1 – 36; Peirce Lewis "The Future of the Past: Our Clouded View of Historic Preservation," *Pioneer America* 7 (1975): 1 – 20.

30. But see, again, Furnas *The Americans* and Zube *Landscapes*.

31. The rewards can be greatly multiplied if one draws pictures of what one sees. I do not mean arty impressionistic sketches; I mean literal, primitive drawings, the virtue of which is to *force* one to notice details that might otherwise go unseen. A similar device (which will to cause artists to recoil in disgust) is to project a slide onto a piece of paper and draw the image, omitting as little as one can. Mere tracery? Certainly. Cheating? Certainly not. One is learning to look and see details, not to render masterpieces.

32. D. W. Meinig. "Environmental Appreciation: Localities as a Humane Art," *Western Humanities Review*, 25 (1971): 1 – 11.