

The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes

Geographical Essays

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The Beholding Eye

Ten Versions of the Same Scene

D.W. Meinig

"Landscape" is at once an old and pleasant word in common speech and a technical term in special professions.¹ As Americans become more conscious of and concerned about their visible surroundings—their environment—it is going to crop up more frequently in both realms of conversation and it may be useful occasionally to consider a difficulty that almost inevitably arises as soon as we attempt to communicate beyond very narrow professional circles.

A simple exercise will quickly reveal the problem. Take a small but varied company to any convenient viewing place overlooking some portion of city and countryside and have each, in turn, describe the "landscape" (that "stretch of country as seen from a single point," as the dictionary defines it), to detail what it is composed of and say something about the "meaning" of what can be seen. It will soon be apparent that even though we gather together and look in the same direction at the same instant, we will not—we cannot—see the same landscape. We may certainly agree that

may be difficult to trace with assurance. In any case, whether the historical view is meant to serve curiosity, reflection, or instruction, the landscape provides infinite possibilities.

There is a logical complement to this view of landscape as history, one which overlaps and is yet distinct in perspective and purpose: a view of

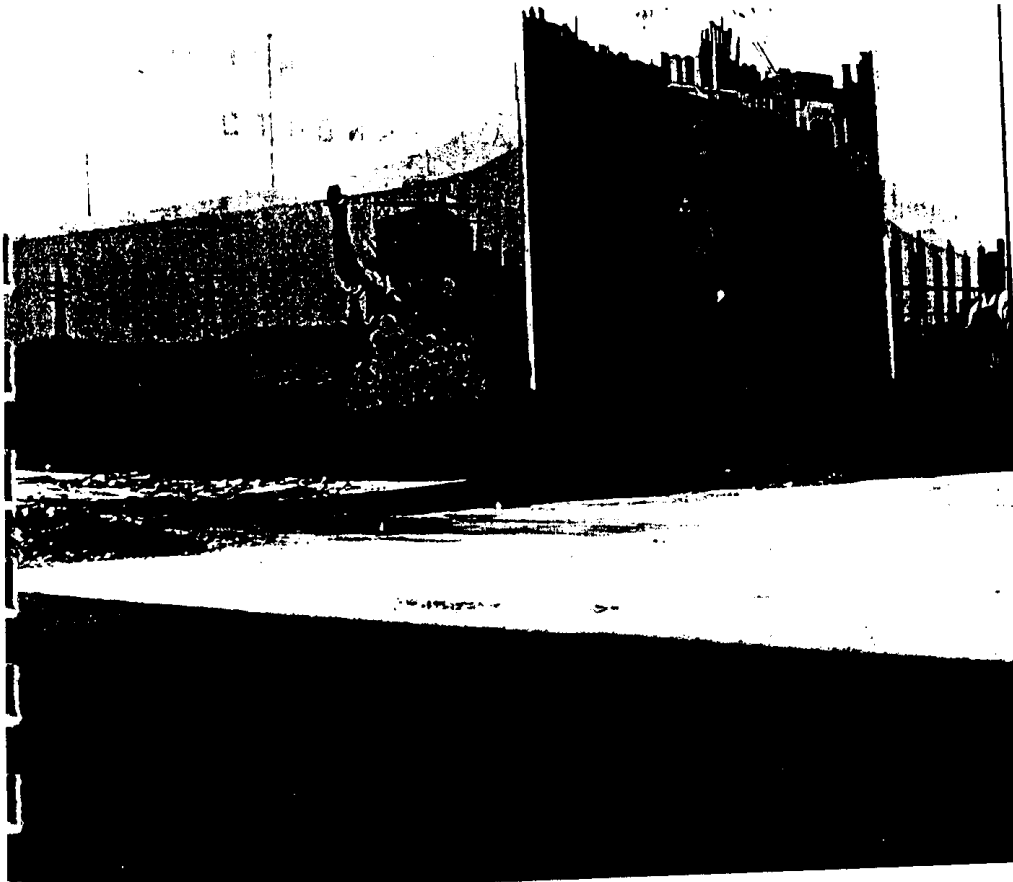
landscape as Place.

In this view every landscape is a locality, an individual piece in the infinitely varied mosaic of the earth. Such a viewer begins by being at once comprehensive and naive: by encompassing all and accepting everything he sees as being of some interest. It is landscape as environment, embracing all that we live amidst, and thus it cultivates a sensitivity to detail, to texture, color, all the nuances of visual relationships, and more, for environment engages all of our senses, the sounds and smells and ineffable feel of a place as well. Such a viewer attempts to penetrate common generalizations to appreciate the unique flavor of whatever he encounters.

It is the view cultivated by serious travel writers with the effective assistance of the photograph and the sketch to display both physiognomy and impressions of a place. Closely akin, with a greater emphasis upon individual persons in their environments, is the work of the "local" or "regional" novelists, the best of whom can evoke a keen sense of the individuality of places.

Such a view is also old and central ground to the geographer, whose field has at times been defined as a study of the characteristics of places. The chief badge of the geographer is the map. To him a place is at once a location, an environment, and an areal composition, and the last is best expressed on a map, a symbolization of the spatial arrangement of the elements of the locality. Compositions have form, and the geographer will see in the landscape a variety of areal patterns and relationships: clusters, nodes, scatterings, gradations, mixtures. These of course take on meaning only when interpreted with some understanding of history and ideology, of processes, functions, and behavior, and of larger geographic contexts. And the geographer, like the historian, can pursue his interests in either direction: toward generalization or particularity.

Those interested in particular localities share a belief that one of the greatest riches of the earth is its immense variety of places. It is a view which far transcends the banal tourist search for the exotic; true believers



To see landscape as ideology may lead to attempts to envision the persons who have shaped the underlying philosophies of a culture. The citizens of Bukhara have been provided with a rather explicit visual aid. (R.G. Jensen)

pattern of predictable events, the historian sees the particular cumulative effects of processes working upon the particular elements of this locality. The degree to which the historian relates the particular to the general depends upon his purpose, but any historical view clearly implies a belief that the past has fundamental significance, one aspect of which is so pervasive as to be easily overlooked: the powerful fact that life must be lived amidst that which was made before. Every landscape is an accumulation. The past endures; the imprint of distant forebears in survey lines, land parcels, political jurisdictions, and routeways may form a relatively rigid matrix even in areas of rapid change. The landscape is an enormously rich store of data about the peoples and societies which have created it, but such data must be placed in its appropriate historic context if it is to be interpreted correctly. So, too, the landscape is a great exhibit of consequences, although the links between specific attitudes, decisions, actions, and specific results

exo have a shaping influence upon the designs of the planner and landscape architect, and we should be wary of making invidious distinctions.

This view of landscape as wealth is of course strongly-rooted in American ideology and reflective of our cultural values. It represents our general acceptance of the idea that land is primarily a form of capital and only secondarily home or familial inheritance; that all land, all resources, are for sale at any time if the price is right; that speculation in land is a time-honored way to wealth.

Such a view is clearly the mark of a society which is strongly commercial, dynamic, pragmatic, quantitative in its thinking and the very landscape itself must reflect such characteristics. So much so, that one can sit upon that hilltop, look out over our scene, and see

landscape as Ideology.

Just as the scientist looks through the facade of obvious elements and sees processes in operation, so others may see those same elements as clues and the whole scene as a symbol of the values, the governing ideas, the underlying philosophies of a culture. Where those who see landscape as problem see disorder, clutter, incongruity, congestion, pollution, sprawl, and dereliction amid the glitter, those who see it as ideology may see distinct manifestations of American interpretations of freedom, individualism, competition, utility, power, modernity, expansion, progress. That does not mean they cannot see the problems, but that they are more concerned to look more deeply to see how the landscape represents a translation of philosophy into tangible features.

For such persons a quiet, reflective study of an American landscape may evoke not only those ideas but the men associated with them, so that, hovering like ghosts over the distant view, are its real creators. Who are they? No two viewers are likely to visualize the same pantheon, but John Locke, Adam Smith, Charles Darwin, Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Jackson Turner, John Dewey might stand out fairly clearly.

To see landscapes in such terms is to see as a social philosopher and to express a firm belief that broad philosophical ideas matter in very specific ways. It is a view which clearly insists that if we want to change the landscape in important ways we shall have to change the ideas that have created and sustained what we see. And the landscape so vividly reflects really fundamental ideas that such change requires far-reaching alterations

in the social system. Hence, for example, the scorn for "beautification"—the planting of flowers by the roadside—as a mere cosmetic which masks the need for painful change.

To see landscape as ideology is to think about how it was created, but there is another way of doing that which, while at its best is reflective and philosophic, is also much more detailed and concrete: to see

landscape as History.

To such a viewer all that lies before his eyes is a complex cumulative record of the work of nature and man in this particular place. In its most inclusive form it sends the mind back through the written record and deep into natural history and geology. More commonly it reaches only back to early man, and usually in America to the first European settlers.

The principal organizing system is chronology, which is not in itself history but the scaffold upon which one constructs history. Thus every object must be dated as to origin and to significant subsequent change. Exact dating may require tedious research, but the skilled landscape historian working in a generally familiar culture area can assign approximate dates to most items based upon materials, design, ornamentation, purpose, position. By classifying features according to age the landscape can be visualized in terms of layers of history, which are sometimes rather distinctly separated in area, as with a new housing tract, but more often complexly interwoven.

The visible landscape is not a full record of history, but it will yield to diligence and inference a great deal more than meets the casual eye. The historian becomes a skilled detective reconstructing from all sorts of bits and pieces the patterns of the past. He learns how indelible certain features tend to be, such as the basic geometry of routes and lots, and how changeable and deceptive others are, such as facades and functions. And there is much more to be learned than chronological changes. The physiognomy of a house, its size, shape, material, decoration, yard, outbuildings, and position, tells us something about the way people lived. Furthermore every house had its particular builder and each has been lived in by particular individuals and families and something of that, too, may perhaps be read in the landscape.

This can be a view of landscape as process, but with a different emphasis from that of the scientist. Where the latter sees an association of classes of things being affected by generalized processes to form a general

or spirit. For such a person, other views of landscape are utterly inadequate. To regard the scene before us as no more than a laboratory for so-called objective research is to be indifferent to human needs; every landscape evokes wrath and alarm, it is a mirror of the ills of our society and cries out for drastic change.

Nevertheless, this view of landscape through the eyes of the social actionist may incorporate something from all these other views: it evokes a reverence for nature, a deeply felt concern for the earth as habitat, and a conviction that we have the scientific ability to right these wrongs. What is needed is a far greater awareness of what is happening and why. It is thus a view which tends toward a humanism harnessed to politics in the hope of generating a genuine populist movement against what is regarded as a callous, selfish, or simply inert establishment.

Perhaps the basic scripture of this movement is that masterpiece of quiet horror, Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring*. It is an apocalypse, a Book of Revelation of the last days of life on earth. But the most powerful evidence is the landscape itself and thus the most effective tract is a book of photographs showing what desecration we have wrought, as, for example, William Bronson's display of California in *How to Kill a Golden State*.

But those who exhort us to look with alarm and act with whatever political clout we can muster represent only the more extremist wing of the viewers of landscape as problem. There is another set (in fact they overlap a good deal) which is not so much a shrill citizenry as an interrelated group of professions for whom every landscape is a *design problem*. The problems they see may be functional (congestion, danger, incompatible uses), aesthetic (clutter, lack of proportion), or something of both; their common perspective is to look at the landscape and imagine a different one: one they have redesigned. It is not that every landscape is in crisis, but that every one is a challenge, every landscape induces a strong itch to alter it in some way so as to bring about a more pleasing harmony and efficiency.

Ideologically, such persons are expressing a strong humanism grounded in science and linked to aesthetics which seeks to apply professional skills to making over the earth. It is obviously closely related to the view of landscape as artifact: the critical difference lies in the realm of control and comprehensive planning. The title of a well-known book expresses it succinctly: *Man-made America: Chaos or Control*.⁵ And therefrom arises a whole set of grave problems for any democratic society: who is to control? by what means? to what extent? for what purpose? (And therein lies ample justification for ever-wider discussions of "landscape" at every

level.) Whereas the tool of the social actionist is the propaganda tract featuring the worst to be seen in the real landscape, that of the designer is the plot plan, the sketch, the perspective of the imagined landscape when improved by his application of art and technology.

Such design specialists are not alone in imagining "improved landscapes." They are in fact far outnumbered by those who see

landscape as Wealth.

map-engineer's office

Such persons are wont to look upon every scene with the eyes of an appraiser, assigning a monetary value to everything in view.

It is a comprehensive view, for everything has or affects value within a market economy. And it is a logical and systematic view which is continually adjusted to keep it concordant with ever-changing reality, for appraisals of property are recurrently tested by actual transactions which affect not only that sold but others adjacent or of similar kind. Like that of science, it is a penetrating view which looks beyond the facade to peer within and to organize what it finds in abstractions. It looks at a house and sees square-footage and the number of bedrooms and bathrooms; it looks at a business building and sees length of frontage, capacity, storage space, delivery access. It is a keen geographical view which reflects a quick sense of how things are actually arranged in a landscape, for relative location, quality of neighborhood, and accessibility are fundamental determinants of value. It takes note of age, but with a concern for depreciation, obsolescence, fashion, prestige, rather than an interest in history as such.

Public properties—schools, libraries, streets, parks, reservoirs, garbage dumps—are fitted into the system, for each affects the value of its surroundings, as do other site qualities—trees, hills, valleys, and especially "views" from residential property. Furthermore, people have a place in such an appraisal, for where the rich and where the poor live, work, shop, play, and go to school greatly affect property values.

Such a view of landscape is future-oriented, for market values are always undergoing change and one must assess their trends. Such, obviously, is the view of the speculator, but it is also the view of the developer and is thus akin to that of the landscape designer, for "development" is usually thought of as "improvement" and may involve strong feelings of creativity and of contributing to the benefit of society. The fact that it also enhances the developer's personal wealth taints it with selfishness, but vanity may also

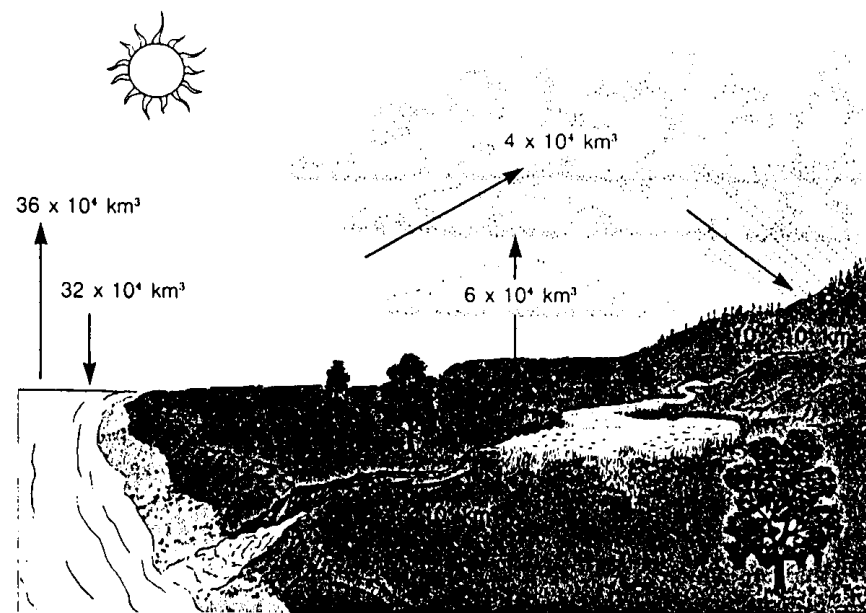
as individual objects, ensembles of varied elements, or classes of phenomena, but as superficial clues of underlying processes. Such a mind sees a river not as a river, but as a link in the hydrologic circuit, a medium of transport carrying certain volumes of material at a certain rate within a segment of a cycle, a force altering the shape of land in a consistent calculable way. Such a mind sees trees not in terms of species, dimension, color, nor even as major organic features, but as chemical factories powered by sunlight, lifting stations in the hydrologic cycle, biological transformers in the energy exchange between lithosphere and atmosphere. In such a view landscape is a dynamic equilibrium of interacting processes.

Man is of course an inexorable part of these systems in one way or another. His more obvious structures and movements in the landscape are most likely to be seen as "functions," that is, as processes undertaken for rational purposes. Houses, garages, barns, offices, stores, factories are all "service stations" and "transformers," and may be regarded as crude, imperfect, outward expressions of abstract social and economic systems.

Such a view is wholly the product of science, a means of looking inside matter to understand things not apparent to the naked untrained eye. It is a view still in vigorous development, beginning with analysis, disintegrating things into their parts, and turning increasingly to synthesis, putting things together in such a way as to give us a new level of understanding interrelationships. It is likewise the view of social science, which seeks to emulate physical science, and finds its reality not in persons or idiosyncratic arts, but in aggregates, in group behavior.

For such persons the landscape that others may see is only a facade which their vision penetrates to reveal a transect of intricate pulsating networks, flows, interactions, an immense input-output matrix. To the extent that it can be understood, it takes on "reality" for them in diagrams, schemata, formulae. It is an ideology that implies a faith in man as essentially omniscient; that man through the rigorous disciplined power of his mind will eventually understand all that lies before him in the landscape; that ultimately through science we shall know the truth.

Of course we are far from knowing enough as yet and thus the landscape can be regarded as a laboratory, an experiment station. Actually, because science, by its nature, demands intense specialization from most of its practitioners, no one viewer can envision anything like the full range of questions to be asked, and no landscape will serve as an equally suitable laboratory for the full range of specialists. But the eyes of the fluvial geomorphologist and of the social psychologist have a similar kind of selectiv-



To see landscape as a system is to penetrate the facade to discern a transect of pulsating flows, an immense energy exchange: The hydrologic cycle. (Leo Laporte, *Encounter With The Earth* [San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1975])

ity, seeking the general amidst the particular, to build similar kinds of abstractions for similar purposes. Because any such findings need repeated testing, any one landscape can be no more than a sample area.

Such may be the way in which the basic research scientist regards our scene, but there are others who may be armed with similar tools but see it very differently, for they see every

landscape as Problem.

That is, see it not as a problem in the scientific sense of a need to know more in order to understand better, but as a condition needing correction.

To such a person the evidence looms in most any view: eroded hills, flooding rivers, shattered woodlands, dying trees, dilapidated farms, industrial pollution, urban sprawl, neon strips; garbage and grit, smog and sewage, congestion and clutter, and amidst it all, people impoverished in body

Every landscape is therefore basically a blend of man and nature. Man may make mistakes, damage nature and thereby himself, but in the long run man learns and nature heals. Thus even when landscape seems to display some maladjustment, it is only a phase in man the domesticate working toward symbiosis, a process he has been engaged in for a million years.

This, too, is an old and attractive view. It is the ideology of the harmony of man and nature, of the earth as the garden of mankind, of man as the steward, the caretaker, the cultivator. Man must adjust to nature, but nature is basically benign and good and when properly understood will provide a comfortable and enduring home. It is a view never better expressed than in Ellen Churchill Semple's opening lines sixty-five years ago in her monumental *Influences of Geographic Environment*:

man is a child of the earth, dust of her dust; the earth has mothered him, fed him, set him tasks, directed his thoughts, confronted him with difficulties . . . given him problems . . . and at the same time whispered hints of their solution. . . .³

It is an ideology which had a major impact upon a number of fields, especially upon the early stages of human ecology and anthropogeography. The central working concept was "environmentalism" in one form or another. It strongly shaped those classic regional monographs in France, a rich body of rural studies in Europe, and underlies admiration for the richly humanized landscapes of the peasant world. Until recently China's "farmers of forty centuries" were often cited as a model of harmonious adaptation and the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer is one among many related idealizations in Western thought.

The general concept is not only still alive, it is rapidly gathering strength in somewhat more sophisticated form. It lurks in various guises within much of the recent literature on ecology and environment. But as man's power to affect the earth has increased, his reworking of nature may appear to be less an adjustment and more so fundamental an alteration that one may see the

landscape as Artifact.

Such a person sees first of all and everywhere the mark of man in everything. Nature is fundamental only in a simple literal sense: nature provides a stage. The earth is a platform, but all thereon is furnished with man's

effects so extensively that you cannot find a scrap of pristine nature. The soils, trees, and streams are not "nature" as distinct from man, they are profoundly human creations: soils altered by plowing, cropping, burning, mulching, fertilizing, draining; forests cut and burned and the whole complex changed by new associations of species; streams silted, channeled, their regime affected by myriad changes in their watersheds. The very shape of the land surface has been modified in a thousand ways, by cuts and quarries, excavations and embankments, fills, dams, culverts, terraces, revetments. Even the weather, and especially that most directly affecting man, near the ground, has been altered by changes in surfaces and in the heat, dust, and chemicals discharged into the air. But also the weather is no longer very important, for man lives increasingly indoors in carefully controlled atmospheres.

In this view it is thus idle sentiment to talk of man adapting to nature in modern America. Indeed his buildings and streets and highways appear more often to be sited in utter disregard for the contours of nature. A rigid linear geometry has been set discordantly but relentlessly upon the varied curves of nature. So comprehensive and powerful has been man's role in changing the face of the earth that the whole landscape has become an artifact.

Ideologically this is a view of man as creator, not only emancipated from, but the conqueror of, nature. Although the concept may have roots deep in history, its full flowering is recent. In science it is marked by recognition of man as ecologically dominant. The work of George Perkins Marsh more than a century ago is an early landmark in calling attention to man's impact,⁴ but the twentieth century concept of man as technocrat in charge of remolding the earth to suit his desires marks the more radical shift. It is concomitant with the growth in the pervasive power of the engineer to alter the physical earth and of the biologist to alter organic life.

But the motivation of science is deeper than this utilitarian, manipulative expression. For the scientist, driven by a desire for understanding for its own sake, engaged in the endless exploration of the world we live in, may look out upon our scene and see

landscape as System.

He may see all that lies before his eyes as an immense and intricate system of systems. The land, the trees, roads, buildings, and man are regarded not

we will see many of the same elements—houses, roads, trees, hills—in terms of such denotations as number, form, dimension, and color, but such facts take on meaning only through association; they must be fitted together according to some coherent body of ideas. Thus we confront the central problem: any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads.

Recognition of that fact brings us to the brink of some formidably complex matters. But it is not necessary to plunge into the technical thickets of optics, psychology, epistemology, or culture to converse intelligently about the topic. It is far too fascinating and important to be left fragmented and obscured in the jargon of such specialists. It deserves the broad attention that only ordinary language allows. And so let us review some of the different ways our varied group might describe a common scene. We are concerned not with the elements but with the essence, with the organizing ideas we use to make sense out of what we see.

There are those who look out upon that variegated scene and see, first and last,

landscape as Nature.

For them all the works of man are paltry compared with nature, which is primary, fundamental, dominant, enduring. The "vault of heaven," the "rock of ages," the "everlasting hills," are old metaphors which tell us that if we really ponder the landscape, it is nature that controls. The sky above, the ground beneath, and the horizon binding the two provide the basic frame, holding within the lay of the land, its contours and textures; the weather and the light, ever-changing with the hours and seasons, affecting all our perceptions; and at all times some display of the power of nature, its quiet inexorable rhythms, the power of growth, of moving water, the immense power of storms. Amidst all this man is miniscule, surficial, ephemeral, subordinate. Whatever he does upon the surface of the earth, even his greatest skyscrapers, dams, and bridges, are, by comparison, minute, feeble, and transitory; mere scratchings on the skin of Mother Earth.

Such a viewer is ever tempted in his mind's eye to remove man from the scene, to restore nature to her pristine condition, to reclothe the hills with the primeval forest, clear off the settlements, heal the wounds and mend the natural fabric—to imagine what the area is *really* like. It is an old and deeply rooted view which separates man and nature. Ideologically it

had its greatest vogue in eighteenth century Romanticism, in that longing for wilderness, in the view of nature as pure, fine, good, truly beautiful. It had a major impact upon nineteenth century science, as the very term "natural sciences" attests.

It can be a seductive view. It is not hard to see beauty and power in nature. One can feel an awe and majesty even in mere depictions of nature, as in the photographs of Ansel Adams and those beautiful books of the Sierra Club. And it is a view which may again become more common, for the more people begin to see man's works as despoliation, the more they will see pristine nature as perfection, as a baseline from which to measure corruption.

The romantic view is in fact very much alive, usually, perhaps necessarily, expressed as a kind of nostalgia:

There was a time, in the sweet childhood of the human race, when man lived close to nature . . . the world of nature and the world of man were synonymous. . . .²

But that describes a unity rather than a separation, and it is quite possible even today to regard

landscape as Habitat.

In such a view, every landscape is a piece of the Earth as the Home of Man. What we see before us is man continuously working at a viable relationship with nature, adapting to major features, altering in productive ways, creating resources out of nature's materials; in short, man domesticating the earth.

The basic patterns in the landscape, the patchwork of fields, pasture and woods, of homesteads and villages, the plan of cities and suburbs, all reveal man's conscious selection of soils and slopes, elevations and exposures, sites and routes provided in the beginning by nature. So too the very shapes, colors, textures, and other qualities of things, of fences and buildings, of trees and flowers, animals and birds, reflect man's selection from earth's great bounty and his reworking, retraining, rearranging into desirable forms. And man himself in so many ways, in diet and dress, emblems and rituals, in his everyday work and play, reveals his adaptations, often subtly and unconsciously, to nature.

are comprehensive: literally every place is of some interest. Indeed, it is a view which suggests that a well-cultivated sense of place is an important dimension of human well-being. Carried further, one may discover an implicit ideology that the individuality of places is a fundamental characteristic of subtle and immense importance to life on earth, that all human events *take place*, all problems are anchored in place, and ultimately can only be understood in such terms. Such a view insists that our individual lives are necessarily affected in myriad ways by the particular localities in which we live, that it is simply inconceivable that anyone could be the same person in a different place.

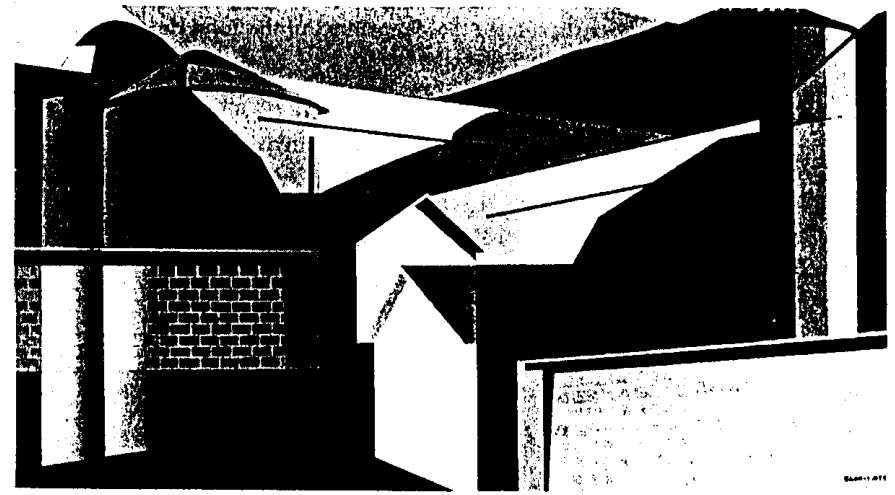
This opening of one's senses to "get the feel" of a place is close to still another view

landscape as Aesthetic. *psycho*

There are many levels and varieties to this view, but all have in common a subordination of any interest in the identity and function of specific features to a preoccupation with their artistic qualities.

"Artistic quality" is of course a matter of endless controversy. It is well known that landscape painting or drawing as a special genre is a feature peculiar to certain eras of certain cultures. The very idea of landscape as scenery is a surprisingly late development in Western culture, requiring as it does a special conscious detachment by the observer. Within the realm of landscape painting we will find examples which express many of the views of landscape discussed: the power and majesty of nature, the harmony of man and nature, the mark of history upon the land, the detailed character of places. Each of these represents a careful selection by the artist. But the "purest" form of landscape as aesthetic is a more comprehensive abstraction in which all specific forms are dissolved into the basic language of art: into color, texture, mass, line, position, symmetry, balance, tension. The versions and variations are infinite in this most individualistic view of landscape.

This, too, is a penetrating view. It seeks a meaning which is not explicit in the ordinary forms. It rests upon the belief that there is something close to the essence, to beauty and truth, in the landscape. Landscape becomes a mystery holding meanings we strive to grasp but cannot reach, and the artist is a kind of gnostic delving into these mysteries in his own private ways but trying to take us with him and to show what he has



Landscape as aesthetic in which the specific forms begin to dissolve into the basic language of art: Charles Sheeler, *Midwest*, 1954. (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis)

found. In this view landscape lies utterly beyond science, holding meanings which link us as individual souls and psyches to an ineffable and infinite world.

Ten landscapes do not exhaust the possibilities of such a scene, but they do suggest something of the complexities of the topic. Identification of these different bases for the variations in interpretations of what we see is a step toward more effective communication. For those of us who are convinced that landscapes mirror and landscapes matter, that they tell us much about the values we hold and at the same time affect the quality of the lives we lead, there is ever the need for wider conversations about ideas and impressions and concerns relating to the landscapes we share.⁶

Notes

1. Marvin Mikesell, "Landscape," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 8, (New York: Crowell-Collier and Macmillan, 1968), pp. 575-80.
2. Garrett Eckbo, *The Landscape We See* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 42.
3. Ellen Churchill Semple, *Influences of Geographic Environment* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), p. 1.