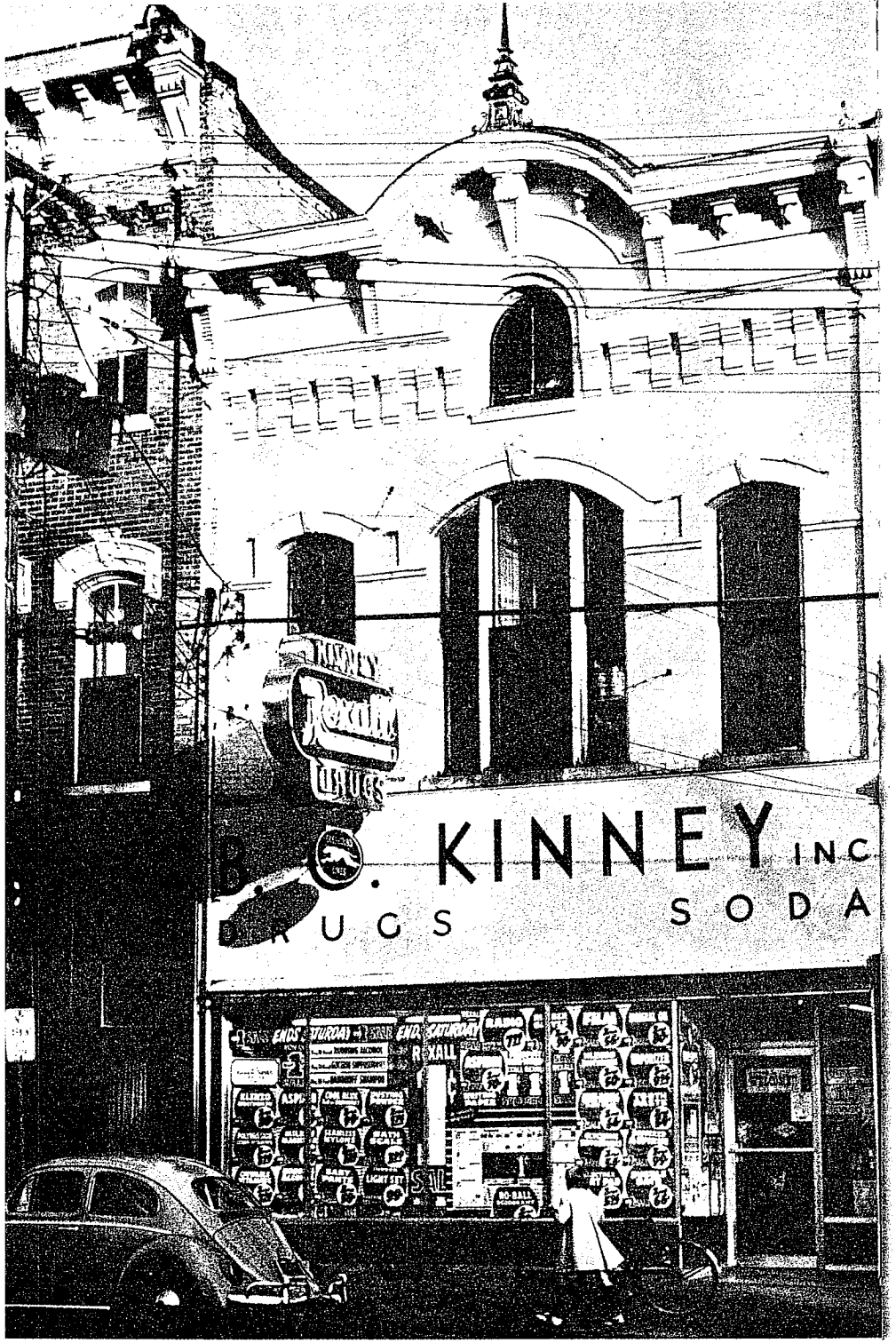


Pulaski, New York (Milo Stewart)

# THE INTERPRETATION OF ORDINARY LANDSCAPES

## Geographical Essays

*D. W. Meinig, Editor*
*J. B. Jackson*
*Peirce F. Lewis*
*David Lowenthal*
*D. W. Meinig*
*Marwyn S. Samuels*
*David E. Sopher*
*Yi-Fu Tuan*

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# The Order of a Landscape

## *Reason and Religion in Newtonian America*

**J.B. Jackson**

For more than twenty-five years I have been trying to understand and explain that aspect of the environment that I call the landscape. I have written about it, lectured about it, travelled widely to find out about it; and yet I must admit that the concept continues to elude me. Perhaps one reason for this is that I persist in seeing it not as a scenic or ecological entity but as a political or cultural entity, changing in the course of history.

I have come to the point where instead of trying to establish distinctions between landscapes, I try to discover similarities; that is one of the differences between the professional and the amateur traveler: the professional searches for (and finds) differences, and is partial to what might be called a kind of academic romanticism: the establishing of distinct categories. The amateur, on the other hand, is more concerned with finding similarities, with perceiving the universal which presumably lies behind diversity.

That is why the classical or conservative temperament finds the

study of history congenial; history repeats itself, establishes patterns and reveals universal laws of human conduct. That, in turn, is why I have become interested in the history of the American landscape, and particularly in one chapter of it; the landscape of the first half of the nineteenth century. I like to think that my interest is more than antiquarian, for to me that landscape represents the last and most grandiose attempt to create an earthly order in harmony with a cosmic order.

## *The Great Tradition*

Let us consider the decades of the mid-eighteenth century, a point in the history of the man-made environment of America when a new and rationalist landscape was about to replace the old medieval, traditional landscape inherited from Europe. It was a time when many relationships in colonial America were changing: relationships between individual members of the family and of society, between individuals and their work, between individuals and their natural environment, and perhaps most significant of all, though hardest to define, a time when the individual was becoming aware of him/herself, and questioning traditional definitions of man. The time was thus approaching when the visible world, especially the man-made world, would begin to reveal those shifts in relationships. For relationships among men and women usually imply spaces, and new relationships produce new ideas of spatial size and location and change or growth. The look of the land, even the look of the house, inevitably reflects those ideas.

We are aware of many of the changes in American society during those decades; every history describes and seeks to account for them: the disintegration of compact and homogeneous towns and villages, the increasing isolation of farms, the distribution and sale of commonlands, and the appearence in the frontier regions of privately financed, speculative settlements; the growth of towns and the decay of some of the older regions; and the growing use of the grid system for land division, not only in towns and cities, but in pioneer communities.

Those are some of the symptoms of change; and the explanations commonly offered for them are no less familiar: the Indian Wars had come to an end on the Atlantic Seaboard, the population was growing, especially in non–Anglo-Saxon elements, and there was an abundance of private capital. All recognize the great importance of these developments, and can see how each in its way affected the Colonial landscape.



We can probably agree on how to interpret them; we can see that they represent a break of traditional ties, social and environmental, and the forming of new relationships based on independence and mobility and rationality, on the release of forces, both destructive and creative, destined in time to alter society and the face of the earth. Relationships, and especially the relationship to the environment, tended to assume a new, more impersonal, more abstract and legalistic form. Land was possessed and exploited not by merely physical means but by contract.

This kind of spatial reorganization is typical of a transitional period (such as we are in now); a period of contradictions and experiments, of the juxtaposition of the old and new, of visual disorder and landscape anarchy. But it is also a period (just as the present is) when there was a search for a new order. And in time that order was discovered.

## *The New Order*

If you ask who discovered it, or when or how, I can give you no precise answer. If you ask what it looked like I can answer that you will see its image on a one-dollar bill, conveniently labelled: "Novus Ordo Seclorum" (The New Order of the Ages). It is a geometrical form, a pyramid, completed by the symbol of an impersonal, all-seeing divinity. However, the date on "The Great Seal of the United States," 1776, does not refer to the origin of the concept: Europe had already formulated the order; it remained for the United States to execute it. Some authorities interpret the image as Masonic, which it may well be, but I think it is best interpreted in terms of Isaac Newton; it was he who gave us a latter-day, classic cosmology, an order based on mathematics and optics.

For such was the order which had begun to transform the European designed environment—the garden, the city, the church and palace, and even the farm—as early as the seventeenth century; an environmental order composed of isolated, independent bodies, moving according to mechanical laws through an absolute undifferentiated space, each one in its prescribed, mathematically measured orbit. Yet in terms of space it was in the New World that the new order first manifested itself, and where it inspired a society based on the predictable and orderly movements of independent, equal individuals, each occupying a portion of the infinite, undifferentiated space made visible in the National Land Survey of 1785.

We have long recognized the role played by Newton's philosophy in

the development of modern political theories; it is clear that the rectilinear, rationalist, almost abstract landscape of the early United States was to a large extent inspired by his classic cosmology. But we have paid too little attention I think to the contribution of religion to the new landscape, especially that of evangelical Protestanism; for we cannot really understand that landscape if we omit the emotional ingredient which the Great Awakening provided.

In the first half of the eighteenth century the colonies, and particularly New England, were still loyal to the traditional organization of time and space; space as centripetal and hierarchical, time as a stately procession of inevitable events leading to a dramatic climax. The colonies were, if anything, more conservative in these respects than England; it was in the New World that men believed most firmly in metaphorical gradations of space and of time. It was over here that the seating of the church congregation still indicated social status, that even the graveyard was laid out to indicate rank, and that every procession was arranged according to social position. Time itself, particularly in the life of the individual, was organized into a fixed sequence of events of increasing sanctity.

But this elaborate duplication of ptolemic cosmology was abruptly destroyed (at least in the activities of the Church) by the religious enthusiasm known as the Great Awakening, which began about 1730. There is little need to recall the doctrinal issues involved in the movement, which died down after a decade, only to revive with even greater force in the early years of the nineteenth century. But it accomplished on an emotional and mundane level what Newton accomplished in science and philosophy: it destroyed the old organization of time and the old organization of space. It thereby established a new vernacular landscape.

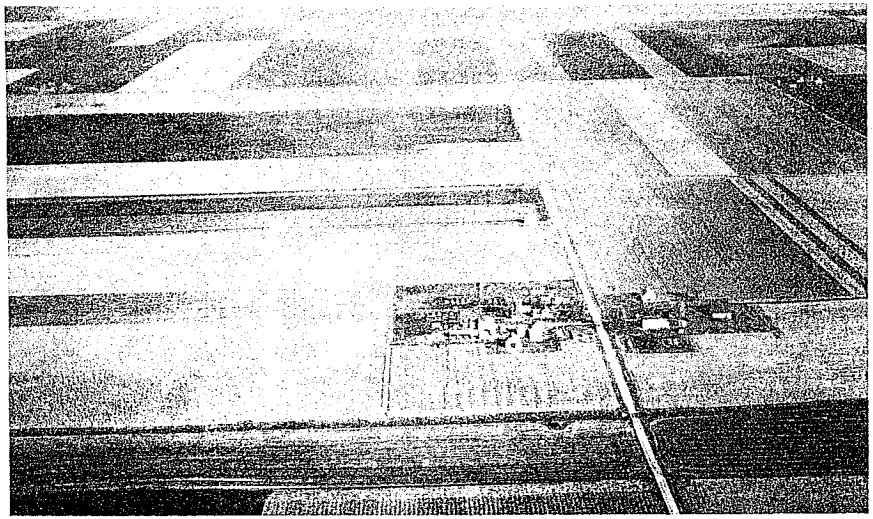
A brief example will probably suffice. The Great Awakening was largely based on the notion that religious conversion—a radical change in spiritual identity and status—could not only be speeded up, but could be even thought of as instantaneous. Conversion, according to a clergyman writing in 1740, "an absolute, immediate, instantaneous work—darted in upon us like a flash of lightning . . . changing the whole man into a new creature in the twinkling of an eye."[1] This was of course contrary to tradition, for as an orthodox clergyman complained, "conversion is a *progressive* work, and the principles and habits of grace are not infused in us by miracle, all at once . . . [but] acquired by degrees, one virtue added to another, and we grow up to Christian life by insensible gradations."[2]

One result of this reorganizing of the spiritual schedule was the total confusion in the order of the church service itself; no one really knew what was to come next. Changes in the notions of space brought about by the Great Awakening were probably even more important; the movement abolished the idea that there were different kinds of space of varying sanctity. It decreed that all spaces—whether in the church or elsewhere—were of equal value, undifferentiated and even interchangeable. One of the objectional features of the Great Awakening, in the eyes of the conservative element, was the destruction of the notion of territoriality: the idea that the church or congregation was firmly identified with a legally defined, consecrated space: the parish. The first hint of this heresey came when itinerant preachers, invited or uninvited, appeared from outside the parish to conduct the new-style service. Eventually the hierarchical seating arrangement was abandoned, and services were held out-of-doors or in private houses—as well as at odd hours. Finally the new sects built their churches at some distance from the established communities, as if to dissociate themselves from the traditional spatial organization.



Is it unwarranted to see a parallel between this reinterpretation of time and space, and the Newtonian theories? There has recently been published a book entitled *The Religion of Isaac Newton,* by Frank Manuel.[3] Newton wrote much on biblical matters, specifically on the book of Revelation; he was not merely fascinated by symbolism and prophecy, but appears to have been an earnestly religious man. In a passage on the heavenly city he wrote in 1680 as follows: "As fishes in water ascend and descend, move whither they will and rest where they will, so may Angels and Christ and the children of the resurrection do in the air and heavens. 'Tis not the *place* but the *state* which makes heaven and happiness. For God is alike in all places. He is substantially omnipresent, and as much present in the lowest hell as in the highest heaven."[1] The passage can perhaps be interpreted as a mystical version of his views of the cosmos; but what is relevant is the declaration that "it is not place but the state which makes heaven," for it anticipated the doctrine of the Great Awakening and its belief in undifferentiated spaces.

It was, as I have suggested, only toward the end of the eighteenth century that the new order, socially and environmentally speaking, began to assume a concrete form. The Great Awakening, both in its spirit and its date, belongs to the period of preliminary dissatisfaction and search. It is *after* the American Revolution that the vision of the new rational, mathematical order began to inspire the designed environment. And it is hardly necessary to say that the most conspicuous examples of the new style are to be found in the Eastern States: in the layout of Washington, D. C.; Manhat-



It was in the early Midwest that the farmer and villager were first confronted with the new order, but the rational, mathematical aspect of this landscape has been revealed to us only with the coming of commercial flying, as in this view of Illinois from an airplane window. (John A. Jakle)

tan; Baltimore; in such smaller designs as those for the new Burying Ground in New Haven; and above all in the so-called Military Townships of upper New York State.

## *The Grid*

The most imposing example, however, is the grid layout of the Northwest Territory, for it was there in the early Midwest that the farmer and villager and pioneer were first confronted with the new order and obliged to complete its design and refine its crudities. This is the landscape I am interested in, with its peculiar combination of Newtonian or Jeffersonian aftermath, the Great Revival.

It is not an easy landscape to understand. Much of the literature of travel in the Midwest has little value from the landscape point of view. Foreigners who explored the region before the Civil War as far as Missouri or Iowa or Louisiana strove hard and often successfully to entertain, and dwelt on such features of American life as table manners, river steamboats,



slavery, political passions, and our tendency to overheat our houses. All followed a more less fixed itinerary: after visiting Washington, New York, and Boston (with a glimpse of Lowell), they went up the Hudson to Niagara Falls, or crossed Pennsylvania to sail down the Ohio, stopping at Cincinnati. Then after a glimpse of "the Prairie," they went down the Mississippi. I have found their set pieces on American scenery all but impossible to read.

I recently studied a number of these works primarily in a search for some early mention of the grid or its visible impact. Aside from a brief passage in Birbeck's "Notes on a Journey in America," written in 1817,[5] I discovered nothing. After describing the township and range system, he says, "All these lines are well defined in the woods; by marks on the trees." That is all. The grid system, despite its present-day visibility, was merely one small aspect of the new American landscape. More impressive and no less common was the isolation of the homes of the settlers, the immense and monotonous distances which separated them, and the absence of sizable towns or villages—space undifferentiated, humanly speaking, from one wooded horizon to the other. The best source of insight into these characteristics are the numerous emigrant handbooks, either in German or English, written throughout the early period. Social historians find them invaluable, for they contain much specific information, simply expressed, on the cost of land, yields of crops, location of markets, distances and means of communication, services and institutions, as well as suggestions as to how to start farming in a new country, how to build a house, what tools and equipment to buy, and so on. Since many of the handbooks were based on personal experience, they contain a good deal of firsthand observation and many shrewd comments on American ways, and though it was not their purpose to emphasize the hardships of pioneer life, they never concealed the problems, economic and psychological, which had confronted them. No matter how much we may have read about frontier existence, these unadorned, essentially optimistic accounts cannot fail to impress us.

Danger in the wilderness was by then no new feature of the American experience; what *was* new was the individual, solitary adjustment to what was still an experimental and incomplete landscape order, a new organization of space that radically affected work and sociability and the business of living. Cabins and houses were hidden from one another by two miles or more of forest; the roads were often impassable and almost invisible. The traditional points of orientation and reassurance—church steeple, tavern, clustering of houses, passersby—did not exist. An Englishman who spent ten lean years in the Midwest peddling Methodist tracts from house to

house and who (it is hard to see why) wrote a melancholy but touching account of his travels, incessantly lamented the loneliness of the landscape, the absence of familiar features, of Wednesday night prayer meetings, of cattle grazing in green fields, of old friends. "To be situated in a place where trifling things, as a little yarn for mending, or soap for washing could not be obtained without going a mile or two . . . taking a day's journey to procure what a shilling would purchase in a few minutes in England; to be thus situated was unpleasant."[6]

Movement, the orderly mechanical movement of independent bodies from one space to another in response to predictable laws (usually economic), was characteristic of the Newtonian landscape of the Midwest. Towns grew on a grid pattern in a matter of months, only to vanish in weeks when a railroad line was built elsewhere. The closest neighbor left without warning for Oregon, six months away. "The Americans are a restless people," said the author of one handbook, "And they will go into a neighborhood, work with might and main for a time in opening up a farm; and when they have it in good trim, fences and houses up, land broken and cropped, and an apple and peach orchard planted; sell out, at from 5 to 15 dollars an acre, and settle down again on new land, to repeat the process." Writing in 1850, an English traveler described the American landscape as "ugly and formal"—ugly in its stumps and dead trees, in the litter-strewn yards, the waste everywhere in evidence; formal in its long straight roads or roadways, its large rectangular fields, its bleak, rectangular little houses, its hilltop churches painted a blinding white, its classical placenames, its endless worm fences. One traveler mentioned a worm fence three miles long, absolutely straight.

It is ironic that the rational, mathematical aspect of this landscape has been revealed to us only within the last generation, with the coming of commercial flying. It was there, of course, all the time, but in the abstract, as it were; and the manner in which men and women moved about within it, like counters in a chess game, justifies the cliché of comparing it to a checkerboard—even though, as H. B. Johnson has correctly pointed out, fields were more rectangular rather than square.[7]

## *The New Individualism*

Yet we must not forget the religious ingredient in the early nineteenth century Midwest: its intense individualism and other-worldliness, its concern for the significant instant. For we are dealing with a landscape largely



settled and inhabited by men and women, whether Methodists or Baptists or Presbyterians or Mormons, who were participating in and promoting the Great Revival: the landscape of the Methodist circuit rider, the itinerant preacher and peddlar of religious literature, of the revival and camp meeting. A traveler tells of a meeting out on the still vacant prairie with a man who announced that he was the prophet Elijah, and handed out a pamphlet warning of the end of the world. As Eggleston and others have described, it was the landscape of the Millerites, of the Latter Day Saints, of innumerable small millenial sects, all acutely aware of the approaching end of historical time.[8] In the traditional past, the question of meaning of existence had always been "Where?" Where did we belong in the social order? Where was sanctity and salvation? But now the question was When? When was the end to come? When to build a permanent house, when to sell, to move, when to plant and harvest? In the meantime the temporary and makeshift sufficed: houses were good for at least a year or two: burials in the back field or under a tree were good until a later date. A favorite hymn contained the lines:

> Strangers and pilgrims here below,
> This earth, we know, is not our place,
> But hasten through the vale of woe
> And restless to behold Thy face
> Swift to our heavenly country move
> Our everlasting home above.

It was inevitable, I think, that the sense of transiency and mobility affected the manner in which families related to the new environment. Throughout the texts there are occasional vivid landscape descriptions, the result of sharp observation, and written without affectation of sensitivity or romantic emotion; written, that is to say, with detachment: descriptions of a winter dawn over the Indiana forest, of a hot summer day in Iowa spent loading cattle onto a Mississippi ferry, of the Illinois prairie in spring, of an angry rattlesnake. But it would be possible to suppose that the new environment long remained the object of suspicion and even fear; it was a place of unknown diseases, strange weather phenomena. Handbooks made the point that while plants and animals in the Midwest appeared to resemble those of more familiar environments, they were really very different. An established literary tradition assures us that America developed a new feeling for nature in the early nineteenth century.[9] I suspect that this was confined to a small class, and was moreover a European importation of little widespread

acceptance. To read the descriptions of the pioneer houses and ways of life is to discern a very definite urge to exclude the untamed outside world. The pride of the homesteader was not in his wider experience of nature but in the cleared field, the brussels carpet on the floor, the store-bought windows which kept out fresh air, the daughter who had taken piano lessons. In the course of not many years the fertility of the soil decreased, and yet manure accumulated so deep in the barn that the only solution was to build a new one.

These traits have been analyzed and criticised by writers and historians, as evidence of American rapacity or ignorance, or (in loftier terms) as forerunners of capitalist exploitation of natural resources. Perhaps those are sufficient explanations. But one cannot help feeling that the spirit of the Midwestern landscape and of the society which created it was not opportunism and greed but unquestioning acceptance of the authority of a revealed truth: the truth of the Bible, the truth of mathematical formulas and rational philosophy. The more one reads about the individualistic behavior of the early settlers the more one is struck by the fact that unlike the contemporary individualist they were not "doing their own thing," as the phrase goes, but acting on what to them has some unimpeachable authority: the Bible, the Constitution, the writings of Thomas Paine or Locke or perhaps even Newton. It was this reliance on the authority of the Book, sacred or profane, that made it unnecessary in their eyes to adjust to the immediate environment in any very effective way. Truth has been revealed in the cosmological order, they believed: why try to find it elsewhere?

A group of cattle-dealers spent the evening in a tavern in Wisconsin reviling the Mormons for their distortion of the Bible; the men cited chapter and verse to prove the heresies of the Mormon faith. A Swiss teacher, exploring the region for a likely place to settle, had the temerity to reproach them for their intolerance. In what he later described as Baroque English (which caused his audience to laugh), he reminded them that God's truth was revealed in two ways: in Scripture, and in the aspect of the material world around us. He said that both the Mormons—this was in 1853—and other Americans, including his hearers, were wrong to rely too much on the Book. He saw this as a great weakness of religion in America and prophesied the coming of a new period, a new order, when science would reveal God's truth in the visible world.[10]

He was right in his prophesy: after the Civil War we discern a new, more pragmatic, more scientific attitude toward the environment and its exploitation. And when that became general we can say that the classical



Newtonian cosmology had been finally rejected and that the classical American landscape was doomed. A new cosmology was even then beginning to take form.

## Notes

1. Alexander Garden, "Regeneration, and the Testimony of the Spirit. Being the Substance of Two Sermons," quoted in *The Great Awakening,* ed. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (New York: American Heritage, 1967), p. 57.
2. Samuel Quincy, "The Nature and Necessity of Regeneration," quoted in Heimert and Miller, *The Great Awakening,* p. 488.
3. Frank E. Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).
4. *Op. cit.,* p. 101.
5. Morris Birkbeck, *Notes on a Journey in America* (London, 1818), p. 71.
6. John Eyre, *Travels in America* (New York, 1851), p. 63.
7. Hildegard Binder Johnson, *Order Upon the Land, The U.S. Rectangular Land Survey and the Upper Mississippi Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
8. Bernard De Voto, *The Year of Decision 1846* (Boston: Little Brown, 1943).
9. Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).
10. Heinrich Busshard, *Anschauugen und Erfahrungen in Nord Amerika* (Zurich: 1953), p. 372.

# Symbolic Landscapes

## *Some Idealizations of American Communities*

**D.W. Meinig**

### *Three Landscapes*

Every mature nation has its symbolic landscapes. They are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which bind a people together.[1]

The topic is a complex one, fraught with nuances and different expressions at various levels of social consciousness, but the existence of the phenomenon seems clear. One need not argue for some mystical bond of Blut and Boden, one need only point to the kinds of landscape images widely employed because they are assumed to convey certain meanings. The simplest examples are those which are clearly identified with specific major institutions or events, such as, in the case of the United States, the White House and Independence Hall. In the great majority of cases the pictures of these buildings put before us in various media are meant to evoke responses which have little to do with the appreciation fo their specific architecture as buildings; rather they are assumed to prompt some connection with our national institutions and history.

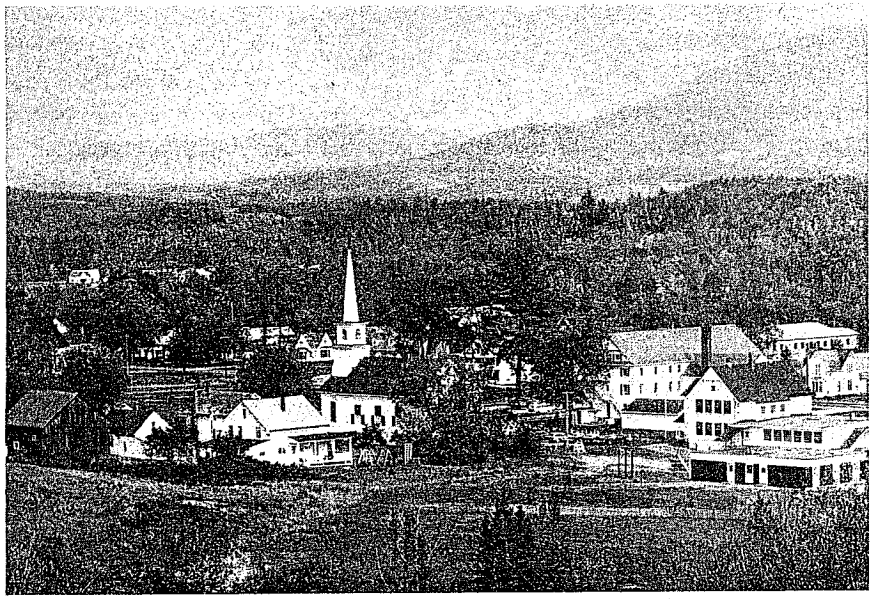


There are also landscape depictions which may be powerfully evocative because they are understood as being a particular kind of place rather than a precise building or locality. Among the most famous in America is the scene of a village embowered in great elms and maples, its location marked by a slender steeple rising gracefully above a white wooden church which faces on a village green around which are arrayed large white clapboard houses which, like the church, show a simple elegance in form and trim. These few phrases are sufficient to conjure an instant mental image of a special kind of place in a very famous region. As the author of a recent guidebook confidently stated:

> To the entire world, a steepled church, set in its frame of white wooden houses around a manicured common, remains a scene which says "New England."[2]

Our interest is not simply in the fact that such a scene "says" New England, but more especially in what New England "says" to us through the medium of its villages. That it says something which is widely appreciated seems clear from the nationwide popularity of such scenes: on calendars, patriotic posters, Christmas cards and other religious materials; in the many prints and paintings which adorn the walls of homes and offices and public places; in their use in advertising, especially for products or services related to the family, home, and security. Just what meaning is intended and what is received from such depictions might be difficult to know with any precision, but drawing simply upon one's experience as an American (which is, after all, an appropriate way to judge a national symbol) it seems clear that such scenes carry connotations of continuity (of not just something important in our past, but a visible bond between past and present), of stability, quiet prosperity, cohesion and intimacy. Taken as a whole, the image of the New England village is widely assumed to symbolize for many people the best we have known of an intimate, family-centered, Godfearing, morally conscious, industrious, thrifty, democratic *community*.

That is of course a projection from an actual landscape and society. The New England village was a distinctive American creation of a very distinctive society. Although many of its features such as the concept of town and village, the arable strips and common lands, and the centrality of the church obviously had English antecedents there were significant differences in form, content, and function. In America the Puritans, who had been



A steepled church set in a frame of white houses around a common says "New England," and is among the most powerful items in the iconography of America. Lyndon Center, Vermont (Vermont Development Agency)

no more than loosely associated fragments within the larger society of England, formed a relatively homogeneous group which attempted at least in some places to create "Christian, utopian, closed, corporate" communities.[3] Their early settlements stamped a distinct imprint upon the glaciated lowlands of New England, and in some loosened form that pattern was spread over nearly all of New England, most of Upstate New York and northernmost Pennsylvania, major districts of Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana, and sporadically over a broad expanse of the Upper Middle West.[4]

The New England village as a landscape form was thus evident in some degree well beyond its source region, and its fame as a distinct kind of community and setting spread far beyond any local imprint. It became national, and the means of such effective diffusion seems generally evident. Throughout the nineteenth century New Englanders dominated the writing of American history and literature, they were the most powerful influence upon American education, and they were self-appointed guardians of American moral authority. It seems reasonable to assert that in association with such activities an idealized image of the New England village became

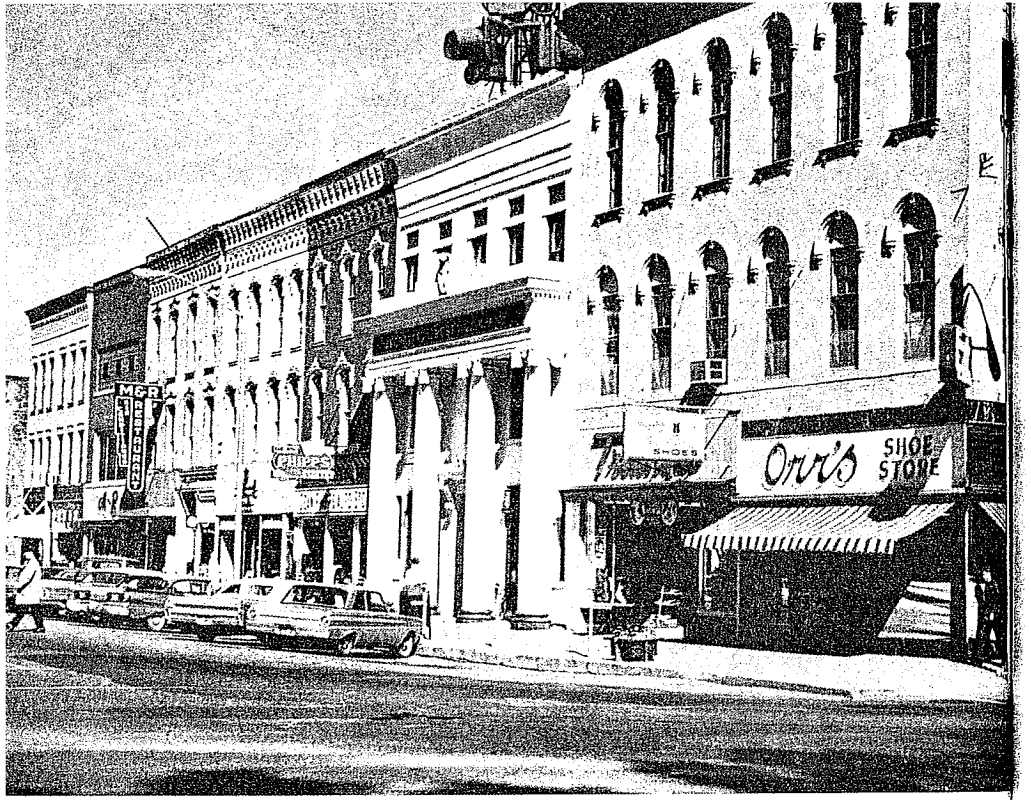


so powerfully impressed upon such a broad readership as to become a national symbol, a model setting for the American community.[5]

There are other model landscapes of American community, emerging out of our national experience with other regions and other times. Certainly a major successor and rival to the New England village is a scene focused not upon the church and village green but upon a street, lined with three or four-story red brick business blocks, whose rather ornate fenestrations and cornices reveal their nineteenth century origins. Above the storefronts and awnings are the offices of lawyers, doctors, and dentists, and above these the meeting rooms of the various fraternal orders. A courthouse, set apart on its own block, may be visible, but it is not an essential element, for the great classical columns fronting the stone temple of business proclaim the bank as the real seat of authority. This is Main Street, and parallel with it lies Church Street, not of *the* church, but of churches: Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopalian, and if there are Yankees present, Congregational. Close by is the academy and perhaps a small denominational college. The residential area begins with big Italianate and Victorian houses on spacious tree-shaded lots and grades out to lesser but still comfortable homes. On the other side of town, below the depot, are the warehouses and small factories. And around it all lies a prosperous farming country dotted with handsome farmhouses and big red barns.

We may well refer to this landscape as Main Street of Middle America. The basic order is linear: Main Street running east and west, a business thoroughfare aligned with the axis of national development. It is "middle" in many connotations: in location—between the frontier to the west and the cosmopolitan seaports to the east; in economy—a commercial center surrounded by agriculture and augmented by local industry to form a balanced diversity; in social class and structure—with no great extremes of wealth or poverty, with social gradations but no rigid layers, a genuine community but not tightly cohesive; in size—not so small as to be stultifying nor so large as to forfeit friendship and familiarity. In this generalized image Main Street is the seat of a business culture of property-minded, law-abiding citizens devoted to "free enterprise" and "social morality," a community of sober, sensible, practical people. The Chamber of Commerce and the Protestant churches are naturally linked in support of "progress" and "improvement." For many people over many decades of our national life this is the landscape of "small town virtues," the "backbone of America," the "real America."

And of course this, too, is an idealized version of an actual landscape, one which emerged in the Ohio country, expanded broadly over the Middle




The classical columns fronting the stone temple of business proclaimed the bank as the real seat of authority, as in this rather subdued version of main street in Bath, New York, just to the east of the archetypical Ohio Country. (Milo Stewart, New York State Council on the Arts)

West, and reappeared in some degree in parts of Colorado, the Sacramento Valley, and the Great Columbia Plain. As a cultural form it drew upon three regional societies of the colonial seaboard. The clearest antecedant is southeastern Pennsylvania with its diverse amalgam of peoples forming social neighborhoods in the rolling productive farmlands and giving rise to thriving market towns.[6] But Ohio was not a conscious imitation and it easily blended in elements from New England, especially in reference to religion, education, morality, and Virginia, especially in political life and forms. Arising in our "national hearth," this experimental ground of the new republic during the first half-century of our national life and characteristic of such a broad realm of our most productive lands where so many millions found some real substance to the American Dream, it is not surprising that this Main Street became an enormously influential landscape symbol, widely assumed to represent the most "typically American."[7]

Created during the canal and early railroad age of the mid-nineteenth

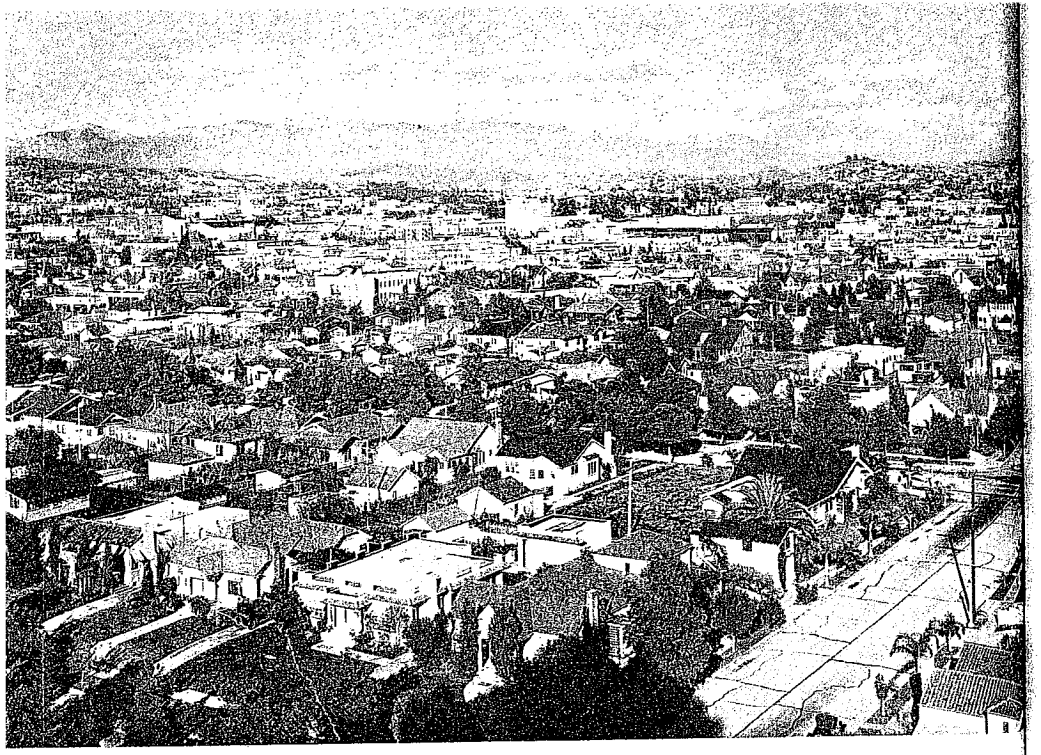


century, such landscapes were readily adapted to accomodate the electric interurbans and street cars of the turn of the century. Early automobiles were also quickly and proudly incorporated, but in time the automobile proved much too powerful to be contained and domesticated within such a landscape. It was such a revolutionary instrument, so penetrating and pervasive in its impact upon American society, that it created its own landscape, its own physical and social form of community.

And so let us visualize a third scene: of low, wide-spreading, single-story houses standing on broad lots fronted by open, perfect green lawns; the most prominent feature of the house is the two-car garage opening onto a broad driveway, connecting to the broad curving street (with no sidewalks, for pedestrians are unknown and unwanted) which leads to the great freeways on which these affluent nuclear families can be carried swiftly and effortlessly in air-conditioned comfort to surfing or skiing, golfing, boating, or country-clubbing, as well as to the great shopping plazas and to drive-in facilities catering to every need and whim.

This is suburbia, but more specifically it is California Suburbia. Of course suburbs did not originate in California. In American they began to appear on the outskirts of many cities in the latter nineteenth century. Sam Bass Warner's well-known book *Streetcar Suburbs* refers to a major example of a type and era.[8] But the idealized suburban landscape awaited the development of something more: not suburbs as mere adjuncts of older urban areas, but a discrete and independent landscape, detaching the term from its literal meaning: not *sub*-ordinate, but the dominant pattern. That awaited the mass-ownership of automobiles, giving every family autonomous, discretionary mobility over wide areas, which, in turn, allowed the development of entirely new "urban" areas designed for the automobile. It seems quite clear that the major culture hearth of this development was Southern California.

A streetcar suburbia of great attractiveness had been developed in Southern California in the wake of the great boom of the 1880s. Influenced by the earlier promotion of subtropical agricultural colonies it had a marked horticultural look with homes surrounded by an effusion of flowers, gardens, and groves. The small irrigated plot amidst the orange groves had proved a powerful attraction to Midwestern migrants, but the emphasis steadily shifted from practical agriculture to simply the enjoyment of life in a wonderfully pleasant environment. It was as an extension from this distinctive kind of regional settlement that the new landscape of Automobile Culture rapidly emerged in the 1920s.[9]



Houses amidst an effusion of flowers, gardens, and groves between the mountains and the sea in the sunny subtropics of Southern California was a new suburbia of great attractiveness. (Los Angeles Public Library)

As Frank Donovan has stated, "the greatest single factor" in the transformation of America in the twentieth century

> was a new concept of the role of the automobile. Starting as a rich man's toy or the plaything of sports, it had become, during the teens, a dependable utilitarian means of transportation, accepted by farmers and the middle class. Now it suddenly became a way of life for all Americans.[10]

Our concern is not with the development of the automobile but of the landscape developed as a result of it. A wide array of new elements was involved, such as new types of houses incorporating garages and carports, new street patterns and road designs, new kinds of automobile service stations and drive-in facilities, motels and shopping plazas, auto clubs and free road maps. Many of these items were developed elsewhere, but taken together as a new culture complex shaping its own landscape it appears first and most thoroughly in Southern California. The East built the cars, but California taught us how to live with them.



Southern California was a strong growth region in the 1920s. Extensive areas of open land were being urbanized and thus designers could create a new landscape to fit the automobile rather than adapt older forms to accomodate a radical innovation.[11] But there was more to it than just room for expansion. (Florida was booming too, but had little noticeable impact on the national landscape.) Southern California was also giving birth to a new kind of society. It might be characterized as a leisure society, not because most of the people were so rich they need not work, but because it was based on a very different attitude toward work which made leisure a positive good, a definite break with older Puritan and Middle American mores. Southern California was the chief source-region of a new American life-style which has been expanding and elaborating for more than fifty years, featuring a relaxed enjoyment of each day in casual indoor-outdoor living, with an accent upon individual gratification, physical health, and pleasant exercise. It was a style which took maximum advantage of a distinctive geographic setting. The patio, swimming pool, and backyard barbeque, furniture and clothing designed for relaxed daily living, the enjoyment of sun bathing, swimming, surfing and tennis were all beautifully appropriate to the sunny summer-dry subtropics amidst the orange groves and flowering shrubs between the mountains and the seashore. The automobile was an integral and essential part of this new individualistic, informal, immediate life-style. It was an assumed feature of major importance to the design of clothing, houses, services, whole cities, and what we have termed the landscape of California Suburbia was the general result.

Furthermore, although distinctively regional in some of its basic elements, this image was idealized and rapidly diffused to the nation. It was a powerful image, for it combined a very attractive physical landscape designed to serve a very attractive new way of life; it was associated with a region which had a mythical quality about it as part of the persistent deep psychological drives of the westward movement;[12] and its depiction was carried to the American public by an unprecedentedly powerful propaganda medium: the cinema. The emergence of this new life-style and of automobile culture was intimately and complexly associated with the emergence of the movie industry. All were bathed in the same glamour, the same association with that which was regarded as "modern" and fashionable. Thus Hollywood, mostly unconsciously, perhaps, put before the eyes of the world a selective, idealized California landscape as if it were the best in American life, an obvious standard to strive for, a model for the future. And for half a

century the nation was so remade in imitation that the stamp of California can be seen on the American domestic landscape even at the farthest environmental remove from that summer-dry subtropical hearth. So, too, the generalized concept of suburbia became "the equivalent of small town America as the symbol of the country's grass roots and the fountainhead of the American Way of Life."[13]

There are other examples of such symbolic landscapes in America. The Southern Plantation is a famous one, but it is generally understood to be regionally limited even though it has had some impact well beyond the Old South. But I believe that the three I have briefly noted, the New England Village, Main Street of Middle America, and California Suburbia, are the three which have been most influential at the national level with reference to idealized communities for family life. Each is based upon an actual landscape of a particular region. Each is an image derived from our national experience which has been simplified, beautified, and widely advertised so as to become a commonly understood symbol. Each has in some considerable degree influenced the shaping of the American scene over broader areas.

If I am at all correct in these assertions (and they are no more than that at this stage, the product of reflection rather than focused research), there remains a lot of interesting work to be done to refine, assess, and apply this basic idea in the interpretation of American culture.

## *Six Questions*

The general topic of symbolic landscapes impinges upon the very essence of what we mean by "American," of what we understand to be the nature of our society and its essential history, and thus ramifies far beyond the competence of any one inquirer or even any particular discipline. The topic would seem to be central to "American Studies," that inherently interdisciplinary enterprise, and because it focuses directly upon relationships between a culture and the landscape it creates, and upon a few specific regions and their influence upon the nation, it would seem to be a topic particularly appropriate to cultural geographers. What follows is a suggestion of some ways to explore this complex terrain, addressed especially to geographers but with implicit recognition that really successful exploring parties would have to include a variety of specialists from several disciplines.



These suggestions are set forth in a sequence of questions which lead, in general, from source to symbol, and from the past to the present and future.

We might well begin our inquiry by asking:

WHAT WERE THE LANDSCAPES WHICH HAVE SERVED AS THE BASES FOR THESE SYMBOLS REALLY LIKE? We may feel we know them well, but perhaps we have been deluded by the very power of the symbols. When we attempt to penetrate the familiar generalizations and clichés about the New England Village, Main Street, and Suburbia, we may be startled at how narrow and uneven are the foundations upon which these stereotypes rest.

Certainly the geographical literature is very thin. We have produced some useful materials, but have hardly begun to put these together to build a much more comprehensive understanding of the making of the American landscape. We need to know not only more about the physical and social character of these three kinds of communities, but much more about how these varied region by region and have been altered era by era. As Zelinsky has recently noted:

> We know surprisingly little about the forms and appearance of the vast majority of the cities and towns of North America. We know even less about the meaning of these phenomena in the cultural scheme of things.[14]

This task is an inherent responsibility of geographers, for other fields simply do not view the topic in such spatial terms. For example, those intensive studies of several New England villages and towns by social historians tell us much we need to know about those places (even if they do not always detail the landscape in ways we might wish), but how representative such places were of how large an area remains quite uncertain.[15] A basic step would be a map of morphological types in New England so as to begin to build a geographic context for the assessment of individual cases.[16] Not all, perhaps not even most, New England colonists settled in clustered villages, and the transformation of Puritans into Yankees must surely have been discernible in the landscape of settlement; but we do not as yet have an adequate description of the processes and results.[17] And, of course, we know that over much of southern New England and more selectively elsewhere industrialization and later immigrations so extensively transformed these Yankee communities as to obscure or almost efface those elements symbolic of the region.

Thornton Wilder's classic *Our Town*, one of the most popular plays in the history of the American theater, was set in New England at a very specific time and place. The playwright assumed it was a landscape so familiar to audiences anywhere that he relied not on stage scenery but on a few descriptive phrases to trigger their imaginations. As the curtain rises the Stage Manager walks onto the blank stage and proceeds to tell the audience about the setting for the play. He says that the name of the town is Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, just across the Massachusetts line and that the first act will show what happens on May 7, 1901. He then proceeds to describe in words and gestures "how our town lies," indicating the line of Main Street and of the railroad, pointing to Polish Town across the tracks, mentioning in an aside that some Canuck families live there. He then notes the locations along Main Street of the Town Hall and Post Office, the Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Unitarian churches. The Baptist Church is down by the river, the Catholic over beyond the tracks.[18]

If this sounds more like the landscape of Main Street than of the New England Village, it is because such a village had gotten caught up in the booming business culture of the nineteenth century and been greatly enlarged and diversified. But the special New England elements are there, not only in later references to 1670s gravestones in the town cemetery and to the blanket factory, but in the presence of those "Canucks" (French Canadians, presumably lured by that factory) and the prominence of the Congregational and Unitarian churches. The question here for geographers to investigate is how representative *Our Town* was of the actual landscapes of that time along the Massachusetts–New Hampshire border. And, if there was a close similarity, to assess how representative the communities of that border zone were of New England and of Yankee-influenced regions. The same kinds of questions and need for geographical investigations apply to the assessment of the actual landscapes underlying Main Street and Suburbia.[19]

Thornton Wilder's play was a conscious attempt to create an idealization of community life,[20] and that fact can serve to pose a second question:

HOW DO ACTUAL LANDSCAPES BECOME SYMBOLIC LANDSCAPES? Such a query actually contains two rather distinct lines of inquiry: a) What are the means of selection of particular kinds of localities for idealization? and b) How do these chosen scenes become generalized and imprinted in the public mind? I shall touch on the first of these later in the context of another



question. As for the second, we might begin with inventories of landscape depictions in all kinds of literature and other visual media. Occasionally geographers have made some assessment of important fictional accounts in relation to the actual landscapes upon which they were based.[21] We could well do with many more, but in terms of this question we should probably give emphasis to a wide body of more truly "popular" materials: magazines, newspapers, and advertisements; comic books and textbooks; calendars and greeting cards; photographs, paintings, and sketches, posters and wallpapers. Obviously this is an enormous bulk of materials and any survey will have to be selective. For the purposes of the theme of this essay, special attention might be given to those landscape depictions which are overtly propagandistic in relating to the "American way of life," to settings which are assumed to conjure some association with basic values and mores of idealized domestic life.[22]

For the past sixty years the cinema has been widely assumed to have had a powerful impact on popular attitudes toward many things. It has displayed an enormous range of landscapes to millions of people, and within those myriad scenes there have been some which were obviously meant to convey settings representative of some concept of the ordinary good and happy life in America. An efficient beginning for an investigation of these would be a study of the character of the outdoor sets which the major motion-picture companies maintained on their lots during the peak of the Hollywood era circa 1920s–1950s. One suspects, for example, that "small town America" was filmed time and again on essentially the same set in which the facades of an idealized "typical" Main Street, church, and a few residences had been created. A logical extension of such an inquiry would be an inventory of the actual towns which were used for on-location filming of similar kinds of shows.

Such an inventory of types of scenes is of course only a beginning, but it would allow us to make some ready inferences. If we have some understanding of the intent behind the use of a particular type of scene we may assume that the user believes that such landscapes will indeed provoke the proper response. For example, specialists in advertising could presumably provide us with information, supported in some degree by research, on their understandings of the common psychological associations which various kinds of scenes suggest.

These suggested studies only deal with the basic evidence of use and the assumptions of those who employ landscape depictions for some specific purpose. They will not get us very far in understanding *why* people

regard these landscapes as symbolic of certain values and ideals, but let us turn next to another more limited question:

HOW CAN WE ASSESS THE IMPACT, THE POWER, OF THE SYMBOL? Most social scientists would likely start with people and ask them questions which might reveal their attitudes about such matters, but I think geographers might best start with the landscape itself to see what we can find there of how substance is shaped by the symbolic. That allows us to deal with results rather than opinions, with the past as well as the present, and is the logical point of departure for a field which is fundamentally concerned with environments and places.

Take a simple example: those crude little steeples of wood, or metal sheets, or, nowadays, plastic which one so often sees perched on little meeting houses of various pentecostal sects all over America. Obviously no architect was responsible for them. They surely represent a widespread folk idea of what a church *should* look like. And where does that idea come from? Perhaps from the local examples of the large churches of major denominations, but I suspect a more influential model is something closer in size and materials and assumed to be closer in social concept: the small, white, wooden church of our God-fearing ancestors—and that image is almost pure New England.

Or consider a more extensive phenomena: the diffusion over the entire nation of a succession of California housetypes, the bungalow, mission stucco, ranchhouse, and various "contemporary" styles, strongly affecting the character of the largest growing sector of our metropolitan landscapes. There were always, of course, competing styles of what a nice, middle-class modern house should look like. In the Northeast, Cape Cods and various pseudo-colonials have long competed effectively with Californian models. We need studies in historical geography which will sort out and reveal regional patterns of the presence, proportions, and timing of these distinctive styles.

Or take a more subtle example: consider how New England villages have been remodeled and tidied up to fit the symbol. A very selective migration has moved into a great many of these villages, armed with considerable wealth, taste, and a vision of what a New England Village *should* look like, and has proceeded to dress up those villages and to build houses and shops to conform to those calendar and Christmas card depictions. Presumably few of these people would want to try to recreate the Puritan or Yankee life-style, yet there remains a power in that landscape



as a symbol of an attractive scale and type of local society, and some people do indeed move to such villages to try and recover some more intimate sense of community.

Such topics are small parts of the broad study of the making of the American landscape, a task which despite a few really creative contributors remains in a very early stage and will require the development of an array of new kinds of literature.[23] When we have a much better grasp of this kind of history we will be in a better position to address another question:

HOW DO WE DEFINE AND ASSESS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE IDEAL AND THE REAL? That there is a difference is of course inherent in the very idea of a symbol, but it seems important to take a close look at the nature and scale of that difference.

Take those lovely New England villages just mentioned. The coexistence of two "realities," one consciously tied to the symbolic, the other oblivious of or perhaps antagonistic to such an image, can be a vivid and at times bitter dimension of the current scene. For example, the *New York Times* recently reported on a "classic New England conflict" in Walpole, New Hampshire, over a proposal to build a large pulpmill on the outskirts of the village.[24] During a day-long hearing, "the area's more well-to-do, sophisticated residents . . . wearing goose down parkas and tweed coats" fought the mill as a desecration, while local businessmen and workers "in rough work clothes and boots," whose families had been natives there for generations favored the mill as a source of money and jobs. The reporter noted that the division was seen as an expression of class distinctions which are vivid in the landscape:

> This is, in effect, two towns [villages] within the same border. Walpole itself is a picture-postcard New England town with white Greek revival homes flanking the main street in the town common. . . . Long the site of summer homes for the well-to-do, it has been attracting retired people from other areas, and the tiny town center supports an art gallery and a gift shop.
>
> To the north on Route 12, lies the sharply contrasting hamlet of North Walpole . . . where drab and sometimes ramshackle frame houses huddle closely together by the railroad tracks.

The one group is living consciously and determinedly in a symbolic landscape, having selected that setting for a special way of life, one widely understood and admired by Americans. For such exurbanites, the New England Village is a way of connecting their lives to an idealized past.[25] The

other group continues to face the harsh realities of how to make a living out of this hard New England ground, a problem which has been driving such persons away from these New England villages for generations, and a problem which is simply ignored in the idealizations.

Or consider Main Street. In the idealized version, the people of such communities are usually considered to be very largely middle-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. In some areas such towns were made up of such populations, but a panorama of the landscape of most towns in the Middle West, and especially those which were best representative of latter-nineteenth century business culture, would reveal several other groups: Irish Catholic laborers down along the canal, who were regarded by the spokesmen for Main Street as a dirt-poor, boozing and brawling bunch led by papal agents (the Catholic Church was not on Church Street); Poor Whites on the other side of the tracks, regarded as drifters and dregs who were illiterate, unskilled, and unsuccessful through their own fault; and in the shantytown down along the riverbank, the "colored folk," simple, shiftless, irresponsible, free but never to be equal, destined to be hewers of wood and drawers of water; and, near the end of the century, new social districts crowded alongside the new industries, full of "foreigners" of strange tongues and clothes and manners, huddled around their own churches, taverns, and social clubs.

Such people and their habitations and facilities show up marginally if at all in the symbolic landscape. They are not really welcome on Main Street, they certainly are not part of the idealized community which was considered representative of basic American virtues. Thus the symbol did not encompass the actual diversity of its landscape reference; and the gap between the symbolic and the real, in terms of kinds of people and the way the social system actually operated, came to represent such a distortion that Main Street became widely discredited as a community form, as a large body of American literature attests. Much of the critique focused on size, intimacy, and the emphasis upon business, "progress," and Protestant morality—those very features emphasized in the idealization—as stultifying limitations. When Edith Wharton said in 1927 that "The Great American Novel must always be about Main Street, geographically, socially, intellectually," it was at once an expression of her urbane contempt (and probably jealousy of Sinclair Lewis) as well as a testament to the power of the symbol.[26]

Despite an avalanche of denunciations in novels and plays and chronic derision in jokes and urban folklore, the small town has retained a powerful claim on American sentiment.[27] The meticulously constructed



Main Street remains the most popular of the many sections of the massively popular Disneyland. Its "two blocks of miniaturized architecture," modeled on a Missouri prototype, is a tangible symbolic landscape, a focus for the persisting nostalgia for what is imagined to have been a better scale and form of community life than most of its visitors now enjoy.[28] When Americans dream of the ideal place in which to live, the concept of "small is beautiful" has been a powerfully persisting counterpoint to the general national obsession with growth and bigness.

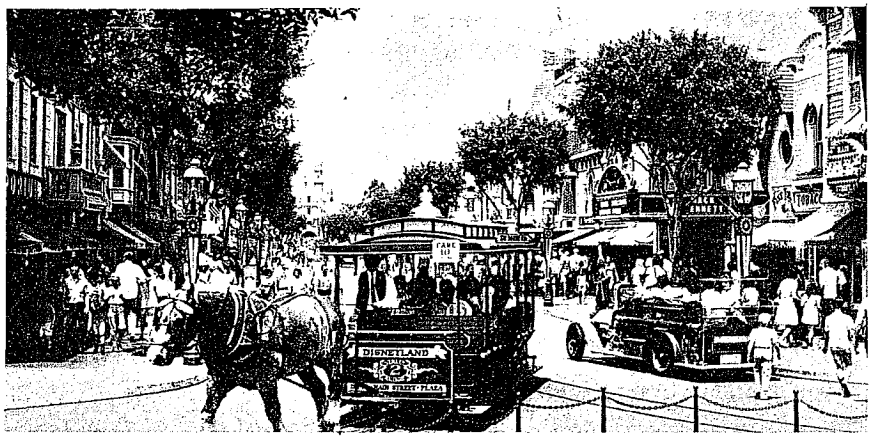
The case of Suburbia has some parallels with that of Main Street. There is a large literature telling us how tarnished a symbol it has become. Nearly twenty years ago David Reisman summarized the view of most social commentators of the time by saying they had come to regard suburbs with

> more loathing than love, finding them homogeneous, conformist, adjustment-oriented, conservative, dull, child-centered, female-dominated, anti-individualist—in a word, impossible places to live.[29]

That certainly suggests the emergence of a wide gap between the symbol and the substance. In part there was also a gap between two actual kinds of suburban landscapes: between the citrus grove suburbia of Southern California of the 1920s (the primary basis of the symbol) and the Levittowns and other massive suburban creations in Megalopolis of the 1950s, (the prime focus of sociological study). And that reinforces the main point of comment on this question: that there is an important task for historical geographers in defining what the landscapes underlying the symbols and the regional variations in those basic types were actually like.

Although all three of these symbolic landscapes still exert some power in American society, it is certain that all three are diminished in influence and, more significant, none of the three is soundly based upon the actualities of community life today. Thus none can be regarded as a satisfying image for the future. Before considering directly the implications of that, however, it will be useful to reflect further upon these three, taken together, and ask:

WHAT DOES THIS THREEFOLD SET OF SYMBOLS TELL US ABOUT AMERICA? Geographers might first note that it is a *set of regions*, with the clear implication that New England, the Middle West, and Southern California have been successively critical areas in our developing national cul-




Converting the symbol into tangible form: Walt Disney's masterpiece of contrived fantasy. (© Walt Disney Productions)

ture. Each in turn has seemed to embody the best, or the essence, of America, a model for the nation. Is that a correct assumption of influence? If so, why did these particular landscapes so serve? Was each in its time the most creative region, the most vibrant powerful center of American development? Such an interpretation would not be exactly concordant with common understandings of the American Core Area, of where the major centers of power were through much of our history. Perhaps we need a reexamination of those common understandings.

Or is it a case not so much of power in some manipulative sense as of seeing our experiences in this succession of regions as the most important we have had as a national people? That, too, seems hard to square with common interpretations: it simply leaves out far too much of our history. Perhaps each region has been critically related to some larger American self-image, representative of what Americans wanted to believe about the kinds of communities they were building, or, more narrowly, what those exerting moral influence wanted us to believe about ourselves. Have these three regions been, in turn, the most important seats of the most influential vehicles of propaganda, for textbooks, popular literature, and cinema (and perhaps others)? That question connects us once again with the problems posed in the second of these six major questions, of how actual landscapes became symbolic, which does appear to be a promising entryway into this kind of broad inquiry.

However we might address this general question, it seems a central



one for anyone interested in pondering regionalism as an important feature in the course of our national development. A corollary of the question is, of course, why are other regions not represented? What does it say, for example, about Megalopolis—that great urban-suburban-exurban strip along our Atlantic Seaboard that has been a seat of such enormous power and influence in so many realms of American development?

But that question might best be considered within another view of these three landscapes as a *set* of symbols. They constitute a threefold *set of kinds of places:* village-town-suburb. And it is obvious that something important is missing: there is no city, no fully urban, or metropolitan landscape in this set (and sequence) of idealizations. Recall that Suburbia is to be seen not as sub-urban, but as a distinct, separate kind of community.

Of course America has created some world-famous urban landscape symbols. That whole breath-taking panorama of Manhattan is the most obvious example. But while that symbol has long served our national pride, it is a symbol of power, energy, daring, sophistication; but not a symbol of an attractive landscape for American family life.[30] Manhattan in particular and our great urban centers in general have proved attractive to highly selective migrations: to people seeking "success" as defined in terms of money, power, and prestige; or to the poor, domestic and foreign, hoping to find some niche and social support in the vast warren. But for most Americans, the old cliché "a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there" has expressed their feelings well, and in recent years they are much less interested in or even fearful of an occasional visit.

It is widely claimed and I think deeply true that Americans in general have been and still are strongly antiurban in their emotions. Sam Bass Warner, Jr., notes in his recent book the "long tradition . . . the endless failures of American to build and maintain humane cities" and asserts that "Americans have no urban history. They live in one of the world's most urbanized countries as if it were a wilderness."[31] We are still escapists at heart. When it comes to attractive symbolic landscapes, our propaganda features the "wide open spaces," "Marlboro Country." Our counterculture movements show the still strong attraction of Arcadia, back to the simple country life, the commune in the woods, ways to drop out of the metropolitan maelstrom.[32]

Over many years we have been offered various visions of a better urban future, but the "garden city" seemed to turn into more suburbia; "urban renewal" became all too often a brutal destruction of landscapes and communities in favor of offices and parking lots; technocratic projec-

tions of tomorrow seem to display a sterile environment fit more for electronic robots rather than living, breathing human beings; Soleri's complex miniaturized city may seem an inspired step toward the Civitate Dei to his followers but more an anthill in the desert to onlookers.[33] We seem to be an ever more urbanized people without a sense of direction, without an effective symbol of what the good urban landscape and society might be like.

We may be living therefore in a serious discordance, but we are not at an impasse. America remains an unusually dynamic and creative society, and therefore the appropriate question with which to conclude this exploration is:

WHAT IS HAPPENING? IS ANY NEW PATTERN DISCERNIBLE IN THE LANDSCAPES OF AMERICAN COMMUNITIES? Perhaps the first thing we would notice in a general look at any American city is that people are still moving outward to the suburbs and beyond. Before assuming that this must mean either that the critics were wrong or suburbanites remain insensitive to what was being criticized, we should consider that it may be that there have been significant changes in the substance of suburbia.[34] There was a period when many a resident agreed with the social critics: suburbs could indeed be deadly dull and stultifying if people tried to find a satisfying community life within their own immediate neighborhoods. The sheer mass and homogeneity of the landscape and society, the distant separation of residence and work, of household and shops, of home and recreation centers, of sex roles and of age groups, provided ample basis for the frustration of residents and castigations by critics, especially in those enormous suburban sprawls of post-World War II. But by the mid-1960s, when two cars became the minimum family standard and the engineers had spun a web of superhighways through, around, and radiating from every city, "community" was no longer a discrete neighborhood, it was a wide scattering of places bound together by the freeways. The places of sleeping, eating, drinking, relaxing, working, and shopping might be fragmented among a dozen points separated miles from one another. Thus we come to the ineluctable observation that the key landscape symbol in late twentieth century America is not the home but the highway, and community is not so much a discrete locality as a dispersed social network traced on the landscape by the moving automobile.

In many ways the automobile rather than the house seems the most powerful instrument and symbol of our basic values. Through it we express our individualism, status, freedom, love of mobility and change, as well as our search for security. It carries us effortlessly to all those amenities and



services made familiar and profoundly democratic by the nationwide uniformity of the McDonalds, Holiday Inns, and a hundred other franchise operations. We move along a linear landscape, intensely developed strips and open interstate routes, made secure and legible by uniform road designs and standardized emblems. And now with citizens band radios, we can communicate directly and anonymously with other individuals, disembodied voices broadcasting at random our craving for contact, as isolated in our steel shells we cruise the monotonous uniformity of the interstate highways.

But a nagging question hangs over this scene: can this kind of atomized dispersal of people living in motorized and electronic connection with their environment and with one another be called "community"? Certainly many would call it a travesty of such. And so the great American longing for something more humane, intimate, stable, and satisfying goes on. The "search" for community, the "quest" of community, the "eclipse" of community persists as a major theme in American thought.[35] *Our Town* was an explicit response by Thornton Wilder to that quest, a conscious idealization to counter the reality he saw of the American as "a nomad in relation to place, disattached in relation to time, lonely in relation to society."[36] Despite its obvious power in fact, despite the great American phenomenon of the mobile home and the motorized home, despite the power of the romantic image of the uncommitted footloose traveler, the Easy Rider drifting from one pad to another, most Americans would not be comfortable with the highway as the appropriate symbolic landscape for a satisfying concept of community.[37]

Not only is there no obvious symbolic landscape of American community today, there is no clear image or even simple common terms for the kind of setting and society most Americans live in. It is not "urban" in the most common sense and symbolic references of that term. The encompassing unit is a metropolitan system of diverse parts, including old densely urbanized areas, suburbs of various ages and character, engulfed towns, roadside strips, shopping plazas at beltway interchanges, a wide variety of discrete residential tracts, former hamlets, towns, farms, and all manner of individual shacks, cottages, mobile homes, houses, and estates scattered over the countryside. The whole complex is bound together by intricate circulation and communication systems and it pulsates with an intense and intimate daily life. It is so vast and variegated and changing that it is difficult to define, but its residents have an intuitive and empirical understanding of its essential character. The highway *is* the fundamental structural element of this landscape, and residents must become travelers skilled

in routes, landmarks, and estimates of travel time. In common parlance, going to "the mall" may be replacing going "downtown," but a sense of place with reference to many features may be rather vague and confused, including response to the question "Where do you live?" Insofar as people think in terms of "community," it is likely to involve more than one part of this metropolitan area and the particular combination of parts may differ greatly among residents of the same street. Thus the concept, rarely sharp even in the simplest of settings, becomes ever more blurred socially and geographically, and it is not surprising that we have no ready translations from the realities of such settings into evocative positive symbols. What we have are no more than fragments, most especially the generalized image of the shopping mall, and the upper middle-class suburb with its special style of residences and country club amenities, standardized to cater to executive families transferred every few years from one metropolis to another by national corporations.

It is clear that symbolic landscapes of the character and power we have been considering are not simply designed and marketed to an awaiting public. They arise out of deep cultural processes as a society adapts to new environments, technologies, and opportunities and as it reformulates its basic concepts related to family, community, and the good life. Such changes do not come quickly, and at any particular moment we are likely to be more impressed with continuities than with marked departures from past patterns. Certainly the individual home in the midst of an ample lot, with ready access to a major highway, remains the most prominent element in the landscape of domestic life in America. The relentless outward spread of our cities is powered to a large degree by the emotional bias of an antiurban people caught in an ineluctably urbanizing system. But a new element has rather suddenly emerged within that archetypical domestic landscape: the townhouse condominium. Modern counterparts of the archetypical urban row house, the great majority of these have been built in the suburbs and their acceptance as an alternative to "the free-standing, owner-occupied house of mythologized 'suburbia' involves changes in the symbolism of the house as well as some changes in the functional organization of residential neighborhoods."[38] Such developments reflect important social as well as demographic and economic changes, and while the townhouse by itself may not denote a fundamental shift, it is the kind of landscape clue to broader movements which we may expect ultimately to have significant impact.

It is widely agreed that the past decade or so seems to mark the onset



of portentous qualitative changes in American society even though it is hardly possible as yet to define very precisely what these are or to suggest their probable power and trajectory. At best we can perhaps look for specific signs of change and try to assess their meaning within limited contexts. In geography it is axiomatic that social movements do not upwell all across a continent with simultaneous and uniform effect. Rather they arise in a particular place or kind of place, and are subsequently diffused unevenly. We may expect that the national landscape in the future will be shaped, as in the past, by the influence of a pattern which can first be identified as typical of a particular region.

## *One Possibility*

If we search the surface of America today for major regions of change, rather than for simply elements of change such as suburban townhouses, we will have our attention drawn to portions of what journalists have recently dubbed the Sun Belt, a regional concept which encompasses so much fundamental diversity as to be of very limited utility as a framework for careful geographic analysis. Certainly the South has undergone transforming social, demographic, and economic change, including a vigorous expansion of cities and an extensive reorganization of the countryside. But the overall result appears to be best characterized as a belated integration of the region into the mainstream of national life rather than offering any really new direction. Urban and suburban developments and problems seem basically to reflect those common in recent years to all the nation, modified by the deeply-rooted rural tradition of the South which has resulted in a somewhat looser scattering of homes and industries and a more quasi-rural suburban life-style.[39] Houston, at the western corner of the South, is intensely modern, but also not fundamentally new. Here great wealth and vitality have produced the most splendid urban strips, shopping malls, entertainment palaces, office clusters, and residential enclaves, all served by the most efficient freeway and parking facilities. But all of this is essentially a projection of well-established patterns, a display which is authentically Texan in scale, verve and taste, and deeply national in the social values and technology it represents. Houston of the 1970s represents a significantly amplified center in the geography of American corporate power, but it has little national impact as a distinctive and creative cultural landscape.[40] And something of the same can be said for other major sectors of the Belt, such

as Florida, Central Arizona, and Southern California. These have been areas of great growth, but in patterns largely reflective of national trends that, in terms of life-style and landscape, had been strongly influenced by Southern California during the period between the World Wars. However if we look just a bit farther, we come to an area which has not only undergone very extensive growth but has been the vortex of a variety of social movements which have so directly challenged national patterns as to become loosely labeled as the "counterculture." The search for new centers of cultural creativity inexorably brings us into a focus on San Francisco, the Bay Region, and, broadly, Northern California.

Since Gold Rush times California has been "the Great Exception," to borrow Carey McWilliams's phrase and argument,[41] a vigorous creative area which has always done many things which differ from the American norm. From the first it had considerable influence upon neighboring regions of the Far West and Pacific Rim, but not until Southern California emerged as the hearth of the new automobile-suburbia culture did it have a strong impact upon the nation as a whole. All during the course of its first century the City by the Golden Gate came to have great symbolic power, but always as a unique place, "everybody's favorite American city," loved because it seemed so different from the general character of American cities, attractive especially to those who sought an alternative to the common patterns of American society and landscape.

However, during World War II and its immediate aftermath San Francisco rather suddenly became much more closely articulated to the nation. As Vance has noted, "the founding of the United Nations in the San Francisco Opera House in 1945 . . . symbolized the integration of California into the heartland of ideas and actions," and we can draw heavily upon his seminal exposition of the decades which followed during which "in a fascinating cultural-geographical isostasy, the Bay Area, California, and the West Coast have risen in their impact on American settlement structure as New York and Megalopolis have sunk."[42] The mere mention of names such as North Beach, Haight-Ashbury, Berkeley, Big Sur, the Black Panthers, the Sierra Club, and, indeed, Governor Jerry Brown suggests something of the range of movements which have reverberated through the nation. The Bay Area has been a fertile seedbed of new art, music, literature, religious expression, psychological exploration, and educational experiment; it has been the principal seat of the ecological and environmental movements and of challenges to national attitudes toward unlimited growth, consumption, and technological proliferation; it has been the most famous setting for the



assertion of new patterns of individual and group consciousness and of a great variety of experiments in alternative styles of life. Although many of the specific expressions of these movements have been merely sensational, superficial, ephemeral, or parochial, there is no doubt but what they have deeper levels that do represent a critique of some of the fundamentals of the American way of life, and no doubt that they presage important social change.

Vance suggests that "we are witnessing the birth of a new complex urbanism in which the specialized social districts have begun to replace a synoptic pattern (of land rent) in shaping the morphology of settlement."[43] He sees the Bay Area as being gradually reorganized through a self-sorting of people not by class or income, nor even very firmly by ethnicity or race, but by life-style, resulting in "voluntary districts" (to use Zelinsky's term[44]) formed out of the search for a way of life which may be quite at variance with what have been the cultural norms. It is conceivable that from such developments San Francisco might shed its old anomalous status and serve as the chief basis for a new generalized concept of urban life featuring attractive townhouse living, the vibrancy of social heterogeneity, a greater appreciation of townscape, a deeper sense of history and of place, and a greater emphasis upon the humane rather than the material aspects of life so that the core becomes increasingly more a central social district than a central business district.

It is conceivable, but far from certain. Even in this region the antiurban bias remains strong and Vance describes at some length how the old American search for the ideal has resulted in a strong centrifugal movement, spreading an essentially cosmopolitan population deeply into the woods and mountains of Northern California, radiating northward into Oregon, creating a new Arcadia which is in fact a far-flung Exurbia, the outermost sector of a new metropolitan society. Vance sees this overall complex as "the city-in-the countryside," a new landscape expression of basically old American ideals, and argues that we should be examining the recent history and social geography of California, seeking "to discover not the economically-oriented normative geography, for which Iowa serves well, but rather the cultural dynamics which will foretell the social geography that may well await us all in the near future."[45]

Whether Northern California is the culture hearth of the next in succession of symbolic landscapes we have been discussing remains to be seen. We still know far too little about it, and the whole complex has yet to be defined in terms sufficiently clear and evocative to serve as the means of

powerful symbolic expression. What is certain is that new landscapes, actual and symbolic, are being created, and like those we have already experienced they will be at once a mold and a mirror of the society that creates them. If we are interested in interpreting the nature and course of our national life it might be well to give them closer attention.

## Notes

1. Cf. Philip L. Wagner, "Cultural Landscapes and Regions: Aspects of Communication," in *Man and Cultural Heritage, Papers in Honor of Fred B. Kniffen, Geoscience and Man,* vol. 5, ed. H. J. Walker and W. G. Haag (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), where, under the subtopic "The Morality of Landscape," he states: "I should like to venture the suggestion that all societies . . . everywhere and throughout history have regarded some particular sort of environment as uniquely conducive to the good life, and have labored to create it."
2. Christina Tree, *How New England Happened* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 135.
3. Cf. John M. Murrin, "Review Essay," *History and Theory* 11, no. 2 (1972): 226–75, ref. p. 234; this characterization is a quotation from Lockridge with specific reference to his study of Dedham, Massachusetts.
4. The classic introduction to this spread is Lois Kimball Mathews, *The Expansion of New England: The Spread of New England Settlement and Institutions to the Mississippi River, 1620–1825* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909). There is a large literature on the Yankee impact upon the West, but no general survey of it in terms of landscape. John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1965), has excellent material on New England and Ohio, pp. 115–46, 227–39.
5. It has recently been suggested that there remains such a preponderant emphasis upon New England studies in our historical writing on communities as to constitute "a kind of 'regional imperialism' "; see David J. Russo, *Families and Communities, A New View of American History,* The American Association for State and Local History (Nashville, 1974), p. 255.
6. James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country, A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1972).
7. The classic statement of this claim is that of Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893,* pp. 190–227. A seminal essay emphasizing the importance of this Main Street culture of Middle America (along with the New England Town and the Southern County) is Conrad M. Arensberg, "American Communities," *American Anthropologist* 57, no. 6 (1955): 1143–60.
8. Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs, The Process of Growth in Boston 1870–1900 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press and M.I.T. Press, 1962).*
9. Carey McWilliams, *Southern California Country, An Island on the Land* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946).



10. Frank Donovan, *Wheels for a Nation* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1965), p. 158.
11. Howard J. Nelson, "The Spread of an Artificial Landscape over Southern California," *Annals, Association of American Geographers, 49, no. 3, part 2 (1959): 80–100;* James J. Fink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1975), p. 141; Mark S. Foster, "The Model-T, the Hard Sell, and Los Angeles's Urban Growth: The Decentralization of Los Angeles during the 1920's," *Pacific Historical Review* 64 (November 1975): 459–84.
12. James E. Vance, Jr., "California and the Search for the Ideal," *Annals Association of American Geographers* 62, no. 2 (1972): 182–210; Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream 1850–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
13. Daniel J. Elazar, *Cities of the Prairie, The Metropolitan Frontier and American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), p. 46.
14. Wilbur Zelinsky, "The Pennsylvania Town: An Overdue Geographical Account," *The Geographical Review* 67, no. 2 (1977): 127. He also notes that the New England village and the Middle Western small town are "perhaps the clearest examples of objects that represent the interaction of community personality and physical substance, at least in the form of durable images in the popular and scholarly minds." (Note 6, p. 128).
15. Murrin, "Review Essay;" Russo, *Families and Communities.*
16. Cf. Zelinsky, "The Pennsylvania Town."
17. Just as this book was going to press, Joseph Sutherland Wood's exemplary study "The Origin of the New England Village" (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1978) has come to hand to answer these very questions. Wood carefully examines the "conventional" views of New England settlement as a process and as a type, and tests these against an impressive array of evidence region by region within New England. He concludes that very few colonial New England settlements were truly clustered as in the conventional depictions, rather the formation of relatively compact villages took place during a vigorous but brief period of commercial prosperity during the early federal period. However, the concept of community was relatively strong from the beginning and the church or meetinghouse was the focal point of each town. It was around these places of periodic assembly that most commercial villages eventually formed. Until reading Wood, my own view had been grounded upon conventional interpretations, although I had assumed that the basic form was varied and far from stable; I had been impressed with the landscape changes implicit in the analysis of Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee, Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).
18. Thornton Wilder, *Our Town, A Play in Three Acts* (New York: Harper & Row, 1938), pp. 5–6.
19. Hildegard Binder Johnson has recently asserted that "public interest, including that of geographers, in a discriminating typology of rural towns in the Middle West has been delayed immeasureably by Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Main Street,* which created for Europeans and Americans alike the 'typical' midwestern town;" *Order Upon the Land, the U.S. Rectangular Land Survey and the Upper*

*Mississippi Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 182. Lewis's caricature was of course a harsh critique of the idealized small town. Johnson's book is a fine example of the kind of fundamental historical geographical analysis needed in the study of American cultural landscapes. For Suburbia, the morphogenetic emphasis of James Vance and his students at Berkeley would appear to provide a telling geographic penetration of the common image. See James E. Vance, *This Scene of Man, The Role and Structure of the City in the Geography of Western Civilization* (New York: Harper College Press, 1977),

20. Ima Honaker Herron, *The Small Town in American Drama* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1969), pp. 410–15.
21. E.g., Charles S. Aiken, "Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County: Geographical Fact into Fiction," *The Geographical Review* 67, No. 1 (1977): 1–21. Two prominent British examples are H.C. Darby "The Regional Geography of Thomas Hardy's Wessex," *The Geographical Review* 38, no. 3 (1948): 426–43, and Graeme Whittington, "The Regionalism of Lewis Grassic Gibbon," *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 90, no. 2 (1974): 75–84.
22. It would be interesting to have some samplings of the entire array of landscape depictions over a brief period for these give us important clues to the psychological connections between a people and its land, both in terms of types of environment and of specific regions and localities. See Yi-fu Tuan, *Topophilia, A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1974), for a stimulating reconnaissance of many aspects of such relationships.
23. The topic so phrased of course calls attention to the work of Professor W.G. Hoskins and his associates in Britain. Hoskins's *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1955), is a landmark study which stimulated a whole series of volumes on counties and regions and a series of television films by BBC. In America, J.B. Jackson, the creator and long the publisher of *Landscape* magazine, has been the chief catalyst; see the concluding essay in this book.
24. *New York Times*, 29 January 1976.
25. The chief spokesman for the opponents of the mill, according to the *Times* reporter, was "the urbane managing editor of *Yankee Magazine*," a popular periodical devoted to fostering an appreciation of the history, society, and landscapes of New England, a potent instrument in the symbolization process.
26. Quoted in George Knox, "The Great American Novel: Final Chapter," *American Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1969): 667–82. A.C. Hilfer, *The Revolt From the Village* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), is a penetrating assessment.
27. Herron, *The Small Town in American Drama* and *The Small Town in Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1959), offer an excellent reconnaissance of the wide range of depictions through the whole course of our history.
28. Richard V. Francaviglia, "Main Street Revisited," *Places* 1, no. 3 (1974): 7–11. Francaviglia notes the important departure from the prototype (Marceline, Missouri) and the most common form of the Main Street town in that the Disneyland version terminates in a square and a plaza, giving a sense of enclosure and intimacy, a sense of place, which is in marked contrast to the linear thoroughfare of the usual grid-plan Midwestern town.



29. As quoted in Scott Donaldson, "City and Country: Marriage Proposals," *American Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1968): 547–66.
30. Anselm L. Strauss, *Images of the American City (New York: Free Press, 1961)*, and *The American City, A Sourcebook of Urban Imagery*, ed. Strauss (Chicago: Aldine 1968), are rich in examples. See also Tuan, *Topophilia*, Chapter 13.
31. Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Urban Wilderness, A History of the American City* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 3, 4. Cf. also Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s comments on the deep hostility toward proposals for federal assistance to save New York City from bankruptcy, "Main Street's Revenge," *New York Times*, 29 October 1975.
32. Vance, "California and the Search for the Ideal."
33. Such a glib characterization does violence to the vision and energy which the challenge of creating better urban landscapes has brought forth, but it is not an inappropriate summation within the context of this essay.
34. There is now a large literature on changes over the past 30 years in both the substance and the symbol of suburbia; e.g., *The Changing Face of the Suburbs*, ed. Barry Schwartz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), especially the concluding essay by the editor, "Images of Suburbia: Some Revisionist Commentary and Conclusions"; *The Suburban Seventies*, ed. Louis H. Masotti, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, November 1975; Peter O. Muller, *The Outer City, Geographical Consequences of the Urbanization of the Suburbs*, Association of American Geographers Resource Paper No. 75-2, 1976; *Suburban Growth: Geographical Processes at the Edge of the Western City*, ed. James A. Johnson (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1974).
35. The phrases are titles of prominent books on the theme: *The Search for Community in Modern America*, ed. E. Digby Baltzell (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); R. Jackson Wilson, *In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States, 1860–1920* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968); Maurice R. Stein, *The Eclipse of Community, An Interpretation of American Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960). Cf. The opening sentence of Herron, *The Small Town in American Drama:* "in the course of more than three centuries of developing literary expression in America, two characteristics have appeared repeatedly: a tendency toward introspection, and a longing for community."
36. Quoted from his Harvard lectures in the lengthy obituary in the *New York Times*, 8 December 1975.
37. The literary evidence in support of such a conclusion seems very strong. Books, magazines, and newspapers recurrently echo the theme. An almost random example is the "open letter" by Orville Schell in the *New York Times*, 24 February 1977, under the headline "You Can Move On and On. 'But Somewhere It Must End,' " in which he describes how "the word 'community' is a powerful one for me," how he found it in a small California town ("the concept of the small town is one of the most cherished in American history"), and what it requires for survival: "above all, people will have to decide that they have had it with 'moving on.' "
38. Dennis J. Dingemans, "The Urbanization of Suburbia: The Renaissance of the Row House," *Landscape* 20, no. 1 (1975): 20–31.

39. Which is not to say that the South has not been creative in other ways. It has been a powerful force in literature in part because, as Vann Woodward has noted, its regional experience has been anomalous with America but analogous to that of much of the world; see Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960).
40. Ada Louise Huxtable, "Deep in the Heart of Nowhere," *New York Times*, 15 February 1976. For a brief assessment of its historical role in Texas and the nation see D.W. Meinig, *Imperial Texas, An Interpretive Essay in Cultural Geography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969).
41. Carey McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (New York: Current Books, 1949). See also James J. Parsons, "The Uniqueness of California," *American Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1955): 45–55.
42. Vance, "California and the Search for The Ideal," p. 205.
43. Ibid.
44. Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 134–39.
45. Vance, "California and the Search for the Ideal," p. 204.

# IV

# *Teachers*