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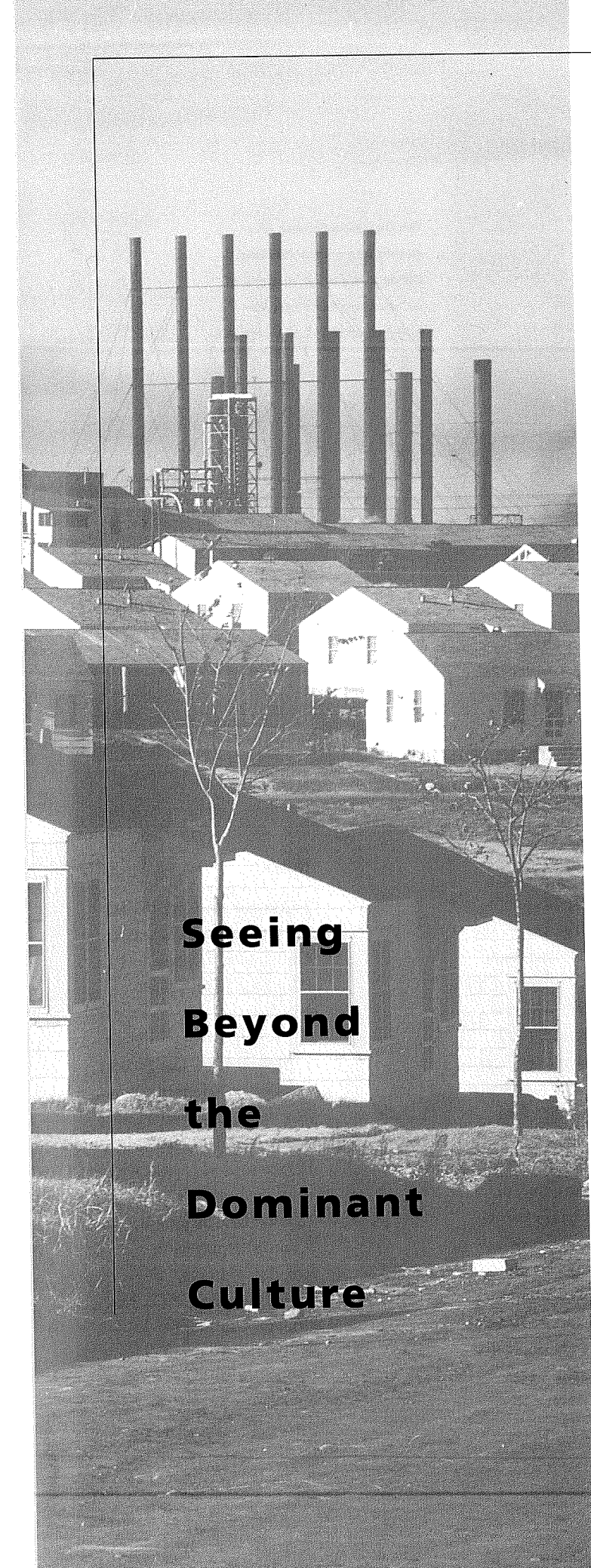
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**Seeing
Beyond
the
Dominant
Culture**

Perhaps the most useful contribution I can make to a discussion about “seeing beyond the dominant culture” is to offer a critical glance at the concept of ethnic landscapes with special reference to the American scene.

For most of our compatriots in recent times, the term *ethnic* has acquired a rather limited definition, but I prefer to frame it in a broader and, I believe, much more meaningful way by having it refer to the *ethnie* or, if you please, the nation. Such a term identifies a fairly large real, or perhaps imagined, community of individuals who cherish a distinctive culture or history and regard their specialness as peculiarly important, setting them apart from other social groups. Such a community may—but often does not—aspire to some degree of political autonomy. If we adopt such a definition, what sorts of ethnic landscapes have ever existed, or are possible, in the U.S.?

What we find in geographic fact in some three million square miles of territory sandwiched between Quebec and the borderlands of Middle America is a single dominant culture—one pervasive ethnic group—an entity we can properly label Anglo-American. (To simplify the argument, I am ignoring the closely related Anglo-Canadian community; the interrelationships between our two communities are close, complex and not yet fully worked out.) The Anglo-American ethnic landscape is the product of early transfer of various immigrant groups and their cultural baggage from northwest Europe, then a certain set of transformations

under the impact of novel environmental and social conditions here, and, subsequently, the automatic acceptance of the resulting package by millions of later arrivals and their progeny.

Needless to say, the invading Europeans encountered in North America a varied set of genuine, pre-existing ethnic landscapes, which were the result of many generations of cultural revolution. We have only a hazy perception of what most of these humanized places were like in visible, physical terms, and for too many virtually no information at all. Obliteration was the fate of nearly all Native American landscapes, with perhaps only one major regional exception—those scattered, but reasonably authentic patches surviving in New Mexico and Arizona. (We can increase the count to two if we consider a large fraction of Alaska.) Elsewhere, the places inhabited or frequented today by Native Americans bear little resemblance to the homelands of their ancestors.

The supremely potent Anglo-American cultural system has its regional variety, of course, and with such variability a distinctive set of regional (but by no means ethnic) landscapes. As it happens, I have spent much of my career exploring these fascinating regional nuances. Thus we have the individualities of New England, the Pennsylvania Culture Area, the Middle West, Southern California, the Mormon Culture Area and other special tracts, but all are locked within a single unifying cultural embrace. The nearest approach to a genuinely autonomous ethnic—and it is a close call—is to be found in the persistent particularities of the South. There are also instances of partial hybridization with alien but related cultures, as in Louisiana's Acadiana and that ethnic shatter zone stretching from Southern California to the mouth of the Rio Grande. And, of course, the entire system keeps on evolving in response to external stimuli and its own internal logic.

But, despite all the intriguing regional variations upon a central theme and the effects of time, there is really no serious challenge to a pervasive, if largely subconscious, code governing the proper ways in which to arrange human affairs over American space: how to cope with natural habitats; how to design towns, cities, houses, roads, other structures, or cemeteries; how to occupy rural territory; and, in general, how to relate to our surroundings.

If, for the sake of argument, you can accept this reasoning, what thoughts can we entertain concerning the sorts of land-

scapes set forth in the three previous papers? I discern two different situations, neither of which can inspire very much cheer among those who enjoy visualizing the U.S. as a multi-ethnic land.

Rina Swentzell's poignant account of the clash of two utterly different mind-sets, two irreconcilable ways of dealing with the face of the earth and the things upon it, serves to remind us that a conflict that began in the American Southwest more than 400 years ago has not yet completely played itself out; that there is no solution mutually acceptable to the two contending ethnic groups. When it comes to the crunch, can there be any question as to which party will prevail?

We can only hope, as much for the sake of our own enlightenment as for the general cause of ethnic integrity, that some pueblo landscapes will remain intact and endure. Clearly there is no comfortable answer to the dilemma of such embattled groups surrounded and constantly assaulted by the intrusions of an overbearing national society. But in the setting of the American Southwest, there is the advantage of having some surviving shreds of the pre-existing landscape around, in this instance one with special appeal even to outsiders, with which to marshal resistance.

No such advantage was available to those relative latecomers from Asia and Latin America (or the earlier ones from Africa) and from those sections of Europe beyond the zone nurturing the founders of our dominant culture. These immigrants confronted a pre-formed, predetermined set of rules, a settlement code already locked solidly into the ground and one they could modify only in the more trivial of details.

That was certainly true in the case of the large, reluctant influx of Africans. With a certain amount of luck you may be able to identify a few tangible items that may have had an African origin, or then again may not. I have in mind such things as the style of some Southern Black church buildings, certain grave decorations, the bare-swept front yard and some gardening practices. But even the Blackest of Southern rural tracts does not replicate any portion of Nigeria or Ghana, and the urban Black ghetto could never be mistaken for any neighborhood in an African metropolis.

I enjoy prowling through the so-called ethnic neighborhoods of our cities as much as anyone and looking at whatever is to be seen. But I must confess that I have never been able to

identify any non-American ethnic landscape in any American city. There are, of course, particular sections of a city where a particular immigrant group, or its descendants, comprises all or most of the population. And, sure enough, one comes across “ethnic markers,” such as distinctive shop signs, exotic religious objects in yards or on porches, ephemeral festival decorations, certain cemetery features, an occasional historical monument, or startling new color patterns for houses acquired by Portuguese-Americans and other chromatically adventurous groups (not to mention what the invading Québécois have done with old Yankee farmhouses in New England). Perhaps the closest approximation to an ethnic statement is in ecclesiastical architecture—those alien synagogues, mosques and non-Protestant church buildings. But, upon further scrutiny, these structures turn out to be compromised structures, a blending of styles and construction techniques from two contrasting ethnic worlds.

But whatever exotic tidbits one may glean in these “ethnic” neighborhoods are the handiwork of rather temporary sojourners, and we are dabbling with cosmetics instead of basics. The immigrants did not design or build the neighborhoods and will almost inevitably pass them on some day to other sets of newcomers. The same neighborhood (including its churches) can be recycled through a varied succession of immigrant groups. The textbook sequence of Irish, Germans, Italians, Eastern Europeans, Jews, Blacks, Hispanics and East Asians observed in several of our larger metropolises is only one of the actual scenarios.

Moreover, some of these transient groups were not aware of their so-called ethnic identity until they were briefed on the matter by 100-percent Americans. That is what seems to have been the experience of many Italian-Americans, German-Americans, Yugoslavs, African-Americans and others who previously had little group consciousness beyond that of their village or region in the Old World.

The disconcerting truth would seem to be that we really have no Polish-American, Greek-American, Jewish-American, African-American, or other such ethnic landscapes in any meaningful sense.

Professor David Chuenyan Lai has served us well by classifying and describing the various types of Chinatowns in the U.S. and Canada, but here again, I must question their au-

thenticity as ethnic expressions. As a matter of fact, Lai reveals the essential visual fakery of such neighborhoods in a single pivotal sentence when he states that “Western architects or contractors built most of the old Chinatown buildings, but they had tried to create ‘chinoiserie’ or ‘exotica’ by modifying or manipulating the standard Western architectural forms.”

And, of course, an ever increasing majority of Chinese-Americans reside in homes and neighborhoods quite indistinguishable outwardly from those of old-stock Americans. I invite the reader to inspect the upscale African-American sections of Greater Atlanta or Washington, the predominantly Jewish suburbs of Detroit or Chicago, those tracts of greater Los Angeles frequented by affluent Americans of Japanese or Korean origin and then shown me their ethnic specialness. The moral, of course, is that all these non-WASP folks were expected to conform and melt into the larger physical fabric of American life as fully and rapidly as possible. And the overwhelming majority were only too delighted to do just that.

What we seem to be getting in our latter-day Chinatowns, whatever their historical origins, is fantasy made tangible, a make-believe China as tourist or patron would like to imagine it or the China best calculated to separate the visitor from his cash. They are specimens of a larger tribe of roadside attractions that includes synthetic Wild West frontier towns and those garish Indian villages to be found in western North Carolina’s Cherokee country and elsewhere. We also encounter their ilk vicariously, at an even further remove, in movies filmed in North African villages, Mexican plazas, or Polynesian paradises on the back lots of Hollywood movie studios. Any resemblance to cultural reality is strictly accidental.

This entertainment genre goes back to Chicago’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, if not to even earlier events, when an array of exotic villages was concocted for the edification of the visitor. Still vivid in my recollection is the Belgian Village of Chicago’s World’s Fair of 1933-34 and other absolutely non-Midwestern villages magically erected along the shores of Lake Michigan. The tradition lingers on, after a fashion, in some of our newer theme parks.

In considering The Power of Place project in which Dolores Hayden has been so deeply involved, we confront a quite different phenomenon or question: How best to remember, or resurrect and celebrate, ethnic history? As it hap-

pens, I am in total personal and ideological sympathy with her didactic strategy and I applaud all such efforts to remind us of a largely forgotten, too often ignominious past—and thus, indirectly at least, to help mend a contemporary world that needs all the healing it can get. But again, I am obliged to express reservations about the ethnic authenticity of whatever landscapes we may be rescuing, restoring, or fabricating.

Hayden's paper suggests a much vaster problem: How are we as a society to deal with the past in its entirety, not just the ethnic facets thereof? How much is to be preserved or rediscovered? To which fragments of the visible fabric of our daily lives should we cling, and which should we permit to change or disappear? Which elements, if any, should be museumized? How do we join together harmoniously the preservable past with an unruly present? But thereon hangs another conference, or rather an endless series of discussions.

Yes, it is certainly important to look beyond the dominant culture, to learn how all those many alien peoples have fared as they tried to cope with that huge, absorbent phenomenon we call the American cultural system. What I question is the effectiveness of examining pseudo-ethnic landscapes as a strategy for getting at cultural adjustment or survival.

Just as is the case with our political and legal systems, we have in the built landscape something thoroughly public—and, to a certain degree, official. It does not take kindly to foreign intrusion or modification, for serious deviance from the norm is simply too offensive to the collective eye. If we wish to explore what is happening with the minority cultures within our borders, we must resort to less visible departments of cultural behavior, to those venues (such as worship, cuisine, social organizations, literature and the arts) where there is space for experiment, improvisation and cross-fertilization.

On the other hand, there are other motives for scrutinizing whatever passes for ethnic landscapes in America. Such places fall within the category of the landscapes of entertainment or fantasy. If we really wish to know more about Americans in general, they deserve our earnest attention.

Wilbur Zelinsky states that most minority cultures within the U.S. can boast of having created only "psuedo-ethnic" landscapes because they have been "only too delighted" to accept the Anglo-American ethnic landscape. He questions the ability of an ethnic people to establish an authentic ethnic landscape without first defining and describing a basic relationship to the land on an everyday and on-going basis (especially immigrants, who confront a "predetermined set of rules, a settlement code already locked solidly into the ground and one they could modify only in the more trivial of details"). He suggests that it is difficult for a group to establish an ethnic identity unless it has first established such a relationship to the land, and denies that the U.S. is a multi-ethnic land because its immigrants have expressed an "automatic acceptance" of the dominant Anglo-American culture.

But what is the immigrant nature of a people? One definition of *immigrant* is "an organism that appears where it was formerly unknown." Non-Native American peoples of the U.S. clearly are people whom the land does not know (recognize). As the first wave of these immigrants came to North America, they indeed stepped into a "settlement code already locked solidly into the ground"—a symbiotic relationship between humans and the land within which humans symbolically and ceremonially recognized and honored the land. But for these immigrants and subsequent waves of new arrivals, the land was first a commodity out of which a livelihood could be eked and later a means to gain profit. Honoring and knowing the land in an interactive relationship was not considered or encouraged by these immigrants.

It is no wonder that with each new immigrant group the hope of forming an authentic ethnic landscape is virtu-

ally impossible. The “absorbent phenomenon we call the American cultural system” allows no possibility for a group of people to define a meaningful relationship with the land of this country because the predominant culture’s concept of land, and especially of land ownership, is focused on use and consumption. All that remains, as Zelinsky tells us, is for people to pretend or fantasize that a meaningful relationship is possible.

As a consequence, we are left with a landscape of alienation—from the land, from each other and from ourselves. Instead, we live within a landscape that shows our blatant worship of consumption and profit.

I define the word *ethnic* to mean a shared cultural tradition, and I see the U.S. as a multi-ethnic nation in which many different cultures co-exist. Native-American, Anglo-American, African-American, Asian-American and Latino are some of the broader ethnic traditions, but there are many more. I myself am an Irish-American and feel sharply differentiated from a WASP, although we might both be called Anglos. People from Guatemala, Mexico and Puerto Rico may find clear differences among themselves despite the fact that others may call them all Latinos. Whatever the ethnic origin of a group, its settlement in the U.S. begins its cultural, political and social history here.

Wilbur Zelinsky uses a different definition of the word *ethnic*. He claims that it means “nation,” and that in the U.S. there are no surviving ethnic landscapes other than those he calls Anglo-American. He defines the Anglo-American landscape as one that was shaped by immigrants from Northwest Europe and has received “automatic acceptance...by millions of later arrivals and their progeny.”

Thus Zelinsky argues for assimilation, the melting-pot theory developed by Robert E. Park of the University of Chicago in the 1950s and expanded in Milton Gordon’s *Assimilation in American Life* in 1964. According to a more recent scholarly review by William Petersen, “With such works American sociologists gave an aura of verisimilitude to the vista of a future either without meaningful ethnicity or at least with little or no ethnic conflict.” Zelinsky extends these sociological problems to geography, arguing for one assimilated cultural landscape.

Recent scholarship in social history, urban anthropology and vernacular architecture has stressed the importance of cultural diversity above that of

assimilation. Dell Upton’s edited collection, *America’s Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups That Built America*, analyzes more than two dozen different ethnic cultural landscapes, mostly rural. Ricardo Romo and Ghislaine Hermanuz provide urban examples in their work on East Los Angeles and Harlem.

Zelinsky no doubt knows some of this new work, but he has a curious definition of what is ethnically authentic. He looks for physical forms that would be part of the ethnic culture of origin rather than part of the immigrant subculture of the U.S., complaining “even the Blackest of Southern rural tracts does not replicate any portion of Nigeria or Ghana, and the urban Black ghetto could never be mistaken for any neighborhood in an African metropolis.”

Of course we do not see Lagos in Watts or Accra in Harlem: It is African-American culture that is distinctive here, not African. Zelinsky does not find Beijing or Canton in the Chinatowns of the U.S., but Chinese-American culture. He does not find Spain or Mexico in Arizona, but Chicano culture, and therefore calls this a “shatter zone.”

Zelinsky’s particular way of looking at landscapes becomes condescending. He decries the “visual fakery” of Chinatowns and for the same reason apparently dislikes “alien synagogues, mosques and non-Protestant church buildings,” calling them “compromised structures, a blending of styles and construction techniques from two different ethnic worlds.” Only pre-industrial, rural vernacular architecture in pristine condition would seem to meet his narrow definition of “authentic.”

We would need many more pages to discuss definitions of cultural landscape, vernacular architecture and urban history that augment our differ-

ent views of the terms *ethnic* and *authentic*. Let me conclude instead by saying that in a multi-ethnic society, we will have great difficulty writing our own multi-cultural history unless cultures such as African-American and Chinese-American are recognized as essential parts of a diverse America.

J.B. Jackson, in whose honor (in part) was held the conference where these debates originally took place, opened up the field of vernacular studies at a time when ordinary people and everyday life were controversial realms of study. In *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* he wrote: "The beauty that we see in the vernacular landscape is the image of our common humanity: hard work, stubborn hope and mutual forbearance striving to be love. I believe that a landscape that makes these qualities manifest is one that can be called beautiful."

For the next generation of scholars and activists, beyond Jackson and Zelinsky, the vernacular landscape of the U.S. will be seen as a terrain where class, gender and ethnicity provide different experiences. But it will be due to the work of an earlier generation of study of the Anglo-American landscape that we will be able to extend their analysis of building and inhabiting American places toward an understanding of the larger whole.

Most of the Chinese who came to the U.S. and Canada during the Gold Rushes did not know English. All the Chinese stores in Chinatowns had Chinese signboards, which were a necessity rather than a decorative component of a structure. Chinatown structures virtually had no other Chinese architectural components.

In those early days no decent white person would enter Chinatowns, which were considered places of vices and evils. According to the old-timers in Canada, white people began to patronize Chinatown businesses after the 1940s. Many Chinese restaurants began to employ all sorts of Chinese decorative details to attract Western patrons. Meanwhile many Chinese associations began to use tiled roofs and other Chinese architectural components to decorate their association buildings; this was one means to enhance the status of an association in the community.

A place is said to express human scale when human beings can relate to it visually, particularly through structural forms increasing or decreasing in size so that an individual feels comfortable in his or her surroundings. In Victoria's Chinatown, for example, the Chinese Gate, buildings, streets and alleys appear as a sequence of transitions from large to small scale. A person's eyes move from large units to smaller and smaller ones, and are able to relate the size of the whole by degrees. As the pedestrian strolls into and through Victoria's Chinatown, a sense of scenic integrity is knitted together at different scales.