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Seeing Beyond the Dominant Culture  [Vision, Culture and Landscape]

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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 land-
scapes 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 individ-
uals 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 pos-
sible, in the U.S.?

What we find in geographic fact in some three mil-
lion square miles of territory sandwiched between
Quebec and the borderlands of Middle America is a sin-
gle dominant culture—one pervasive ethnic group—an
entity we can properly label Anglo-American. (To sim-
pify 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 result-
ing 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 cul-
tural revolution. We have: only a hazy perception of what most
of these humanized places were like in viable, 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 dis-
tinctive 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 cul-
tures, as in Louisiana’s Acadiana and that ethnic slum 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 govern-
ning the proper ways in which to arrange human affairs over
American space: how to cope with natural habitats, how to
design towns, cities, homes, roads, other structures, or ceme-
terries; how to occupy real 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.

Rinz Swentnell’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 South-
west 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 i: 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 embat-
tled groups surrounded and constantly assailed by the intru-
sions 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 latecom-
ers 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 immi-
grants 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 most trivial of details.

That was certainly true in the case of the large, recent
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 here-swept front yard and
some gardening practices. But even the Blackest of Southern
rural races 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 neighbor-
hoods 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 marks," 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 Quebecois have done with old Yankee farmhouses in New England). Perhaps the closest approximation to an ethnic statement is in ecclesiastical architecture—those slum 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 idiosyncrasies one may glean in these "ethnic" neighborhoods are the hard work of rather temporary sojourners, and we are dazzled 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 seas of newcomers. The same neighborhood (including its churches) can be recycled through a varied succession of immigrant groups. The treebook 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 Chaunan 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 authenticity as ethnic expressions. As a matter of fact, Lai reveals the essential visual facery 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 'chinesecer' or 'exica' 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 traces of greater Los Angeles frequented by affluent Americans of Japanese or Korean origin and then shown me their ethnic specialities.

The moral, of course, is that all these non-VASP folk 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 latest-day Chinatowns, whatever their historical origins, is fantasy made tangible, a make-believe China as tourist or patron would like to imagine or the China best calculated to separate the visitor from his cash. They are specimens of a larger tribe of roadside attractions that includes symphonic 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 constructed for the edification of the visitor. Still vivid in my recollection is the Belgian Village of Chicago's World's Fair of 1913-14 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 recuing, 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 musemized? How do we join together harmoniously the preservable past with an unruly present? But theon 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, absorbing phenomenon we call the American cultural system. What I question is the effectiveness of examining pseudo-ethnic landscapes as a strategy for getting at culture 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.

Willbour Zelinsky states that most minority cultures within the U.S. can boast of having created only “pseudo-ethnic” landscapes because they have been “only too delighted” to accept the Anglo-American ethinc 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 ongoing 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-
Dolores Hayden replies:

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 truly differentiated from a WASP although we might both be called Anglos. People from Guatemalas, 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 1920s and expanded in Milton Gordon’s ‘Assimilation in American Life’ in 1964. According to a more recent scholarly review by William Peterson, “With each 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 Root: Ethnic Group: That Built America, analyzes more than two dozen different ethnic cultural landscapes, mostly rural. Ricardo Runto and Ghislaine Hermanau 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 descending. He decries the “usual facery” 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 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.

David Chua-yan Lai replies:

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 tilled 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.