

Students - Peirce Lewis wrote this in 1970's
And it is still applicable today. I have
made a few changes of examples in the
text to update the article. I take no
credit for his ideas.

Axioms for Reading the Landscape Some Guides to the American Scene

Peirce F. Lewis (pp 11-32)

Assignment due
Tuesday - Post to
moodle

About the axioms and about cultural landscape

For most Americans, ordinary man-made landscape is something to be looked at, but seldom thought about. I am not talking here about "natural landscape," but about the landscape made by humans - what geographers call cultural landscape. Sometimes Americans may notice cultural landscapes because they think it is pretty, or perhaps ugly; mostly they ignore the common vernacular scene. For most Americans, cultural landscape just is.

Usage of the word tells a good deal. As a common verb, to "landscape" means to "prettify." If a suburban lot is advertised as "landscaped," it is generally understood that somebody has fussed with the shrubbery on a small bit of ground, perhaps planted a few trees, and has manicured the bushes - more or less artfully. It rarely occurs to most Americans to think of landscape as including everything from city skylines to farmers' silos, from golf courses to garbage dumps, from ski slopes to manure piles, from millionaires' mansions to the tract houses of Levittown, from famous historical landmarks to flashing electric signs that boast the creation of the 20 billionth hamburger, from mossy cemeteries to sleazy shops that sell pornography next door to big city bus stations - in fact, whole countrysides, and whole cities, whether ugly or beautiful makes no difference. Although the word is seldom so used, it is proper and important to think of cultural landscape as nearly everything that we can see when we go outdoors. Such common workaday landscape has very little to do with the skilled work of landscape architects, but it has a great deal to say about the United States as a country and Americans as people.¹

At first, that idea sounds odd. The noun "landscape" evokes images of snow-capped mountains and waves beating on a rock-bound coast. But the fact remains that nearly every square millimeter of the United States has been altered by humankind somehow, at some time. "Natural landscapes" are as rare as unclimbed mountains, and for similar reasons. Mallory expressed a very American sentiment when he said he wanted to climb Everest because it was there. Americans tinker with landscape as if pursued by some inner demon, and they have been doing so ever since their ancestors landed at Jamestown and Plymouth and began chopping down trees. They continue today, and the sound of the power lawn-mower is heard throughout the land.

All of this is obvious, but the implications are less obvious, though very simple, and very important to our understanding of the United States. The basic principle is this: *that all human landscape has cultural meaning*, no matter how ordinary that landscape may be. It follows, as Mae Thielgaard Watts has remarked, that we can "read the landscape" as we might read a book.² Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form. We rarely think of landscape that way, and so the cultural record we have "written" in the landscape is liable to be more truthful than most autobiographies because we are less self-conscious about how we describe ourselves. Grady Clay has said it well: "There are no secrets in the landscape."³ All our cultural warts and blemishes are there, and our glories too; but above all, our ordinary day-to-day qualities are exhibited for anybody who wants to find them and knows how to look for them.

To be sure, reading landscapes is not as easy as reading books, and for two reasons. First, ordinary landscape seems messy and disorganized, like a book with pages missing, torn, and smudged; a book whose copy has been edited and re-edited by people with illegible handwriting. Like books, landscapes *can* be read, but unlike books, they were not *meant* to be read.

I took a long time learning that fact. Years ago, when I started teaching about cultural landscapes of the United States, I was puzzled and annoyed that students seemed so obtuse. They seemed blind to all that marvelous material around them, and even worse, some of them seemed insulted when they were told to go outdoors and use their eyes and think about what they saw. Gradually, I realized that the students were not obtuse; I was. The students were simply aping the great majority of their faculty mentors, who by their inattention to ordinary landscape were teaching the students very effectively that landscape didn't matter: that serious students did not deal with trivial questions about ordinary everyday things, such as what walk-up ATMs or cell towers were meant to symbolize, or why people put pink plastic flamingos in their front yards. JB 2015

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

The Axioms

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

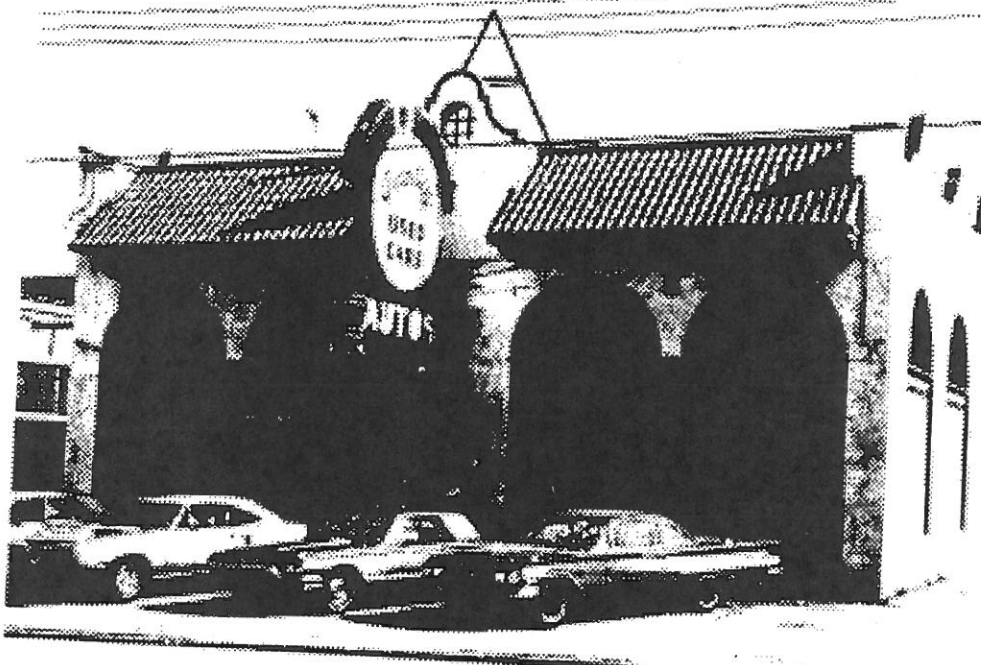
THE COROLLARY OF CULTURAL CHANGE. Our human landscape - our houses, roads, cities, farms, and so on - represents an enormous investment of money, time, and emotions. People will not change that landscape unless they are under very heavy pressure to do so. We must conclude that if there is really major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

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

THE COROLLARY OF CONVERGENCE To the degree that the look of two areas comes to be more and more alike, one may surmise that the cultures are also converging. Thus many small Southern towns look quite different from their Northern counterparts, while Atlanta looks more and more like the "standard" Northern city, and even something like Phoenix, which is perhaps America's most super-American city. One may properly conclude that the cultural rift between North and South is growing narrower, but the process of reunion is taking place faster in urban places than in rural ones, and fastest of all in the suburbs.

JB 2015

THE COROLLARY OF DIFFUSION The look of a landscape often is changed by imitation. That is, people in one place see what is happening elsewhere, like it, and imitate it if possible. The timing and location of such imitative changes are governed by various forms of geographic and social diffusion, which are surprisingly predictable, and which tell us a good deal about the way that cultural ideas spread and change. For example, Greek Revival architecture spread from Virginia into upstate New York in the early nineteenth century and from there, in debased form, to other parts of the country. Both the spread and the debasement took nearly a century to



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

Now in 2015 with globalization, California landscape tastes are imitated in most complete. ¹⁷ Now, in the 1970s, California landscape tastes are widely and wildly imitated in most parts of the country. The delay between California invention and Eastern imitation is extremely small-sometimes almost instantaneous.

JB 2015

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

While most people admit they have "taste" in landscape, and in fact would insist they do, they often claim that their tastes are based on "practical" grounds. That is ludicrously untrue in most instances. A huge amount of our day-to-day behavior and the landscapes created by that behavior is dictated by the vagaries of "fashion" or "taste" or "fad." And when we speak of "taste," we are talking about culture-not about practicality."

At first glance, some fads seem trivial, like ^{pet rocks} slack-lining; or skateboarding: apparent eccentricities that sweep the country and then are gone. But what guides those fads? Are they really so different from the deep-seated cultural biases that anthropologists and cultural

pet rocks JB 2015

Due Tuesday
Assignment

Over the weekend use your cell phone to capture Landscape images that are symbolic of the culture we live in. Post the images to moodle so we can share in class forum