

READING THE LAND: AN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

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ABSTRACT

Cultural landscape, the humanly used portion of the earth between ourselves and the horizon, is increasingly of concern in the field of cultural resources management. The study of landscape, fundamentally an endeavor of cultural geography, seeks to describe and explain the elements and patterns that result from human use of the land. Of particular interest to the cultural resources manager is the ubiquitous historical aspect of landscape, from which we can learn about settlements, sequent occupation and land practices, the relationships of social groups, and world views. The challenge to cultural resources management lies in maintaining historic landscape qualities, while addressing present-day land use needs.

Introduction

The field of Cultural Resources Management (CRM) is becoming increasingly complex, growing during the past 20 years from a field focusing on archaeology to one which addresses a variety of cultural resources. As a profession with a holistic interdisciplinary approach, we work with prehistoric and historic archaeological sites, historical and architectural sites, and traditional cultural properties. Cultural resources managers are now also increasingly being called upon to take cultural landscapes into consideration.

The study of landscape is primarily an endeavor of cultural geography. The eminent American geographer Carl Sauer, in *The Morphology of Landscape* (1925), equated the study of landscape with the field of geography. But there is also an eclectic group of scholars from other fields such as history, regional and urban planning, ecology, archaeology, and architecture who are attracted to landscapes.

Awareness of historic landscapes in a management context is recent. Though historic preservation and cultural resources management landscape literature dates from the

mid 1970s, much of the literature is from the late 1980s to the present (e.g., Andrus 1991; Birnbaum 1993, 1994; Galbreath 1975; Melnick 1984; Mitchell and Page 1993; and Tishler 1980). As a recently developing topic in CRM outside their own area of expertise, many cultural resources managers may not be familiar with historic landscapes. Following, as an introduction to cultural landscapes, is a review of the definition, elements, and study of landscape.

Landscape Defined

John Brinkerhoff Jackson, one of the most renowned of landscape scholars, states that a landscape is "a portion of the earth's surface that can be comprehended at a glance" (1984:8). Christopher Salter defines landscape as "that segment of earth space which lies between the viewer's eye and his or her horizon" (Lewis 1985:50). Fundamentally, these and other definitions of landscape address two elements: the world as perceived interacting with the world-out-there.

Within this context, the basic aspect of landscape is the human imprint. Landscape can be urban or rural, but not wilderness--without

culture there is no landscape. J.B. Jackson writes, "Landscape: a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces" (1984:8). Peirce Lewis emphasizes the ubiquitousness of the cultural imprint: "It is . . . important to think of cultural landscape as nearly everything that we can see. the fact remains that nearly every square millimeter of the United States has been altered by humankind somehow, at some time" (1979:12).

Landscape Elements

The landscape consists of a variety of physical elements. Geographer John Fraser Hart has identified three essential landscape elements: (1) landform, (2) plant cover, and (3) the built environment (1975:1-13).

The land itself is subject to human alteration. Terraced rice fields in Southeast Asia and cattle trails on California hillsides are examples of reshaped land. The land also provides the foundation for vegetation and the built environment. Vegetation can be indigenous or introduced species used for agricultural and ornamental purposes, or species that voluntarily grow in response to lands disturbed by human activity. The built environment includes systems of land division, structures functionally related to the economy, houses, hamlets, villages, towns, cities, transportation networks, ruins, and such small-scale elements as foot bridges, road signs, abandoned machinery, fences, street lights, and cattle gates (Hart 1975:13; McClelland et al. n.d.:5-7).

The Meaning of Landscape

In the interpretation of landscapes there are numerous perspectives one can take, ranging from aesthetic to environmental to political. Geographer D.W. Meinig, in his article *The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene*, identifies the following landscape interpretive themes: nature, habitat, artifact, ideology, system, problem, wealth, place, aesthetic, and history, and he says that, "Ten landscapes do not exhaust the possibilities of such a scene, but they do suggest something of

the complexities of the topic" (1979:47).

Geographer Yi-fu Tuan interprets landscape using art, architecture, science, culture, and ecology. For Yi-fu Tuan the relevance of landscape is its demonstration of how far we have or have not achieved an ideal and humane habitat (1979:101). Denis E. Cosgrove in *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* takes a Foucaultian perspective, viewing landscape as a social and cultural product that restricts us from seeing alternative modes of experiencing our relations with nature (1984:269).

Landscape as History

For the cultural resources manager the significance of landscape lies in a fundamental aspect: history. D.W. Meinig describes landscapes as "layers of history" with every landscape an accumulation of the past (1979:43). J.B. Jackson describes the development of the historical landscape well when he states that, "A landscape gradually took form when people moved into a place, did what they could to survive and prosper with the resources at hand . . . landscapes grew and changed" (1980:114).

A landscape reflects those growths and changes, and can be studied as one would a prehistoric site or an old building. In their book *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*, David Kyvig and Myron Marty identify landscapes as useful in historical studies of the family, communities, and material culture (1982:ix).

The historical aspect of the landscape is stated in Peirce Lewis's *Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene*: "In trying to unravel the meaning of contemporary landscapes and what they have to 'say' about us as Americans, history matters . . . a huge part of the common American landscape was built by people in the past, whose tastes, habits, technology, wealth, and ambitions are different than ours today" (Lewis 1979:22-23).

There are archaeological, built environment, and material culture implications to

this historic aspect of landscapes. As noted in National Register Bulletin 30, "Landscape characteristics are the tangible evidence of the activities and habits of the people who occupied, developed, used, and shaped the land to serve human needs; [reflecting the] beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and values of these people" (McClelland et al. n.d.:3).

Reading the Land

How does one go about reading landscapes? As J.B. Jackson says, "There is no such thing as a dull landscape . . . we have but to learn to read it" (1951:4,5). But, as Peirce Lewis observes, "Like books, landscapes can be read, but unlike books, they were not meant to be read" (1979:12). Fieldwork to record geomorphological, botanical, and human-made features is a beginning point in extracting the past from the landscape (Aston 1985:13-20). By noting the elements and patterns that make up the landscape, the investigator can begin to read the land.

The elements of the land and the patterns they comprise can be studied with a material culture approach: study of the artifact in-and-of-itself will result in information. Historian Thomas J. Schlereth includes chapters on landscapes by Peirce F. Lewis in *Material Culture Studies in America* (1982:174-182), and in *Material Culture: A Research Guide* (1985:35-56). Schlereth also has a section on landscape as artifact in his book *Artifacts and the American Past* (1980:145-203).

There is more to study than the land and what is found there. To read the land, one also researches complementary information to contextualize a landscape. Sources of information about the age, origins, nature, uses, and human views of landscape elements include archaeology, maps, and local archival and oral history (Aston 1985:13-20).

An excellent example of the use of resources for creating a landscape history is Peter G. Boag's book, *Environment and Experience: Settlement Culture in Nineteenth-Century Oregon* (1992). Boag begins with a

paleo-environmental analysis that focuses on the geology, vegetation, and climate of Calapooia Valley in Oregon. He then presents the results of his extensive documentary research of diaries, tax records, business accounts, weather logs, interviews, military reports, and census records, to name just a few of his sources. He combines his field observations with his archival research to discuss the sequential human occupations of the valley, the effects on the land, and the landscape world views of the people occupying the land.

The Challenge to CRM

Landscapes present a substantial challenge to cultural resources management. Landscapes do not differ from the way other cultural resources are evaluated for significance and integrity as regards a resource's relation to history, people, events, art and craftsmanship, and scientific information, i.e. criteria a, b, c, and d of the National Register of Historic Places. Other aspects of landscape, however, pose concerns generally not encountered. One concern to be addressed is that it is the nature of landscape to change, another issue is that a landscape can consist of very large areas, and another concern is that landscapes can be comprised of diverse ownership.

It is the nature of the landscape to change. Unlike an archaeological site, but similar to a historic building, the landscape is actively used, and as such changed, by people. While reflecting the past, it is very much used in the present. Two questions to ask are: (a) What will landscape management do to such use? and (b) Is it appropriate to affect changing landscapes?

A landscape affects a large area, raising the question as to appropriate management procedures when such large areas and many people within that area can be affected. One and the same landscape can be owned by numerous governmental agencies and/or held in diverse private ownership. To seek management consensus in such a situation is difficult at best. As noted by William Tishler, a major concern to be addressed in the management of multiple-owner landscapes is,

"the meaningful involvement of the grassroots citizenry from the diverse cultural landscapes of rural America – a process complicated by their independent nature, special values, and traditions" (1980:28). For urban areas, the problem is just as complicated.

Some basic questions need to be addressed. Can we manage historic landscapes? How is the historic landscape to be managed? As a cultural resource, landscapes have the usual cultural resource management concerns. The issue of historic landscape management, however, involves much more. Landscapes are a cultural resource whose management may have far-reaching effects on large areas of land and the daily lives of many people. This is a challenge to which cultural resources management needs to rise.

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