Frameworks for Cultural Landscape Study

Americans are like fish that can’t see water. Although human life requires the constant support of complex surroundings, most people in the United States do not consciously notice their everyday environments. Universal schooling in science and dozens of television nature programs have begun to sensitize Americans to animals and ecosystems. Yet, even Americans with advanced degrees rarely have concepts for pondering, discussing, or evaluating their cultural environments. These people are in danger of being poor apprecriators and managers of their surroundings.

For almost fifty years, several loosely allied groups of writers and scholars have challenged such cultural ignorance in the United States. Most of them have done so under the rubric of cultural landscape studies. This collective enterprise is not a distinct discipline or academic department, but rather a shared enthusiasm for and concern with ordinary, everyday built environments.

For writers in cultural landscape studies, the term landscape means more than a pleasing view of scenery. Landscape denotes the interaction of people and place: a social group and its spaces, particularly the spaces to which the group belongs and from which its members derive some part of their shared identity and meaning. All human intervention with nature can be considered as cultural landscape: the high-style cathedral or office tower, as well as the Depression-era Hooverville hut, a farmer’s barbed-wire fence, or a kitchen garden. Cultural landscape studies focus most on the history of how people have used everyday space—buildings, rooms, streets, fields, or yards—to establish their identity, articulate their social relations, and derive cultural meaning. The conviction among cultural landscape
lively, privately published journal constituted the first interdisciplinary collection of work in America about cultural landscapes and provided a focus for a coherent interest group.

Jackson's free promotional copies of Landscape quickly attracted loyal subscribers—an audience of previously scattered geographers, anthropologists, designers, historians, architecture historians, and writers. By his international recruitment of authors, national travels for lectures and conferences, and his overt editorial encouragement of particular subjects, Jackson knit together a group of people who began to think of themselves as sharing a common enterprise. Later university teaching, guest lecturing, and writing intensified Jackson's role as catalyst.

Current Frameworks

In spite of Jackson's centrality, no single paradigm has controlled cultural landscape studies in its first half-century. Two generations of writers and scholars have added their own questions, types of sources, and traditions into cultural landscape study, and the parameters of the enterprise are still open. The following statements enunciate very basic but widely held tenets of cultural landscape studies in the 1990s.

1. Ordinary, everyday landscapes are important and worthy of study. At the core of cultural landscape studies is a straightforward question: How can we better understand ordinary environments as crucibles of cultural meaning and environmental experience? A critical word in this formulation is ordinary. Everyday experience is essential to the formation of human meaning. When only monuments or high-style designs are taken seriously, the everyday environment is overlooked and undervalued.

The first issue of Landscape magazine stated that "there is really no such thing as a dull landscape or farm or town. None is without character, no habitat of man is without the appeal of the existence which originally created it . . . . A rich and beautiful book is always open before us. We have but to learn to read it." In 1951, saying there was "no such thing as a dull landscape" was a courageous act. Americans were forgetting the populist ideals of the New Deal and assumed that the important elements of the environment were marked clearly by fences, admission fees, and large-identifying signs showing the way to the entrance. Guidebooks to architecture or city districts pointed out landmark structures but said little or nothing about the spaces between them or the social and economic frameworks in which they existed.

The same situation prevailed among most academic disciplines that looked at the environment. Architects and art historians puzzled over historical or interna-
tional-style masterpieces. A few geographers looked at generic building types and settlement forms, but by the late 1950s they were being overwhelmed by a wave of more abstract and quantitative work. Anthropologists were losing interest in aboriginal architecture and looked only askance at the landscapes of the dominant American culture. Only a handful of social scientists were using historical studies to understand the present. Social and urban historians had begun to focus on rank-and-file social groups but not their surroundings, forgetting the richly detailed spatial documentation contained in turn-of-the-century social surveys and reports of the 1930s. Moreover, to speak of the importance of the visual record and historical evolution of the countryside—and its being equal in interest to the town or city—was highly unusual.

Nonetheless, the voices of Landscape's authors were emphatic and still ring true. Ordinary landscapes are important archives of social experience and cultural meaning. The understanding of landscape by an informed public is urgently needed if citizens are to comprehend the changes in their local communities and countrysides. As the geographer Peirce Lewis put it in 1979, "If we want to understand ourselves, we would do well to take a searching look at landscapes." The human landscape is an appropriate source of self-knowledge, according to Lewis, because it is "our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears." For such an autobiography to be complete, the selection of cultural landscape subjects must be inclusive.

2. Present research subjects in landscape studies are likely to be urban as well as rural, focused on production as well as consumption. Early cultural landscape scholars focused on farmsteads and small towns as records of migration and regional settlement. In such settings, changes could be ascribed to a reasonably consistent group of people who built gradually. A few cultural landscape writers have contended that only rural settings are landscape. For these people the farmhouse, barn, field, and road are truly landscape; the parking lot, suburban neighborhood, and factory are something else, perhaps cityscape. More scholars feel that one term covers all. City, suburb, countryside, and even wilderness are all human constructs, all touched by human management. All are cultural landscape.

Parallel to the urban and rural reach of landscape studies is an interest among its practitioners in production landscapes as well as in landscapes of consumption and leisure. Within the best rural studies, generic farmhouses or barns are not studied as isolated objects; they are seen within the context of the whole farm economy and its relation to city houses and city workplaces. While the farmsteads of landowners have received ample attention, fewer studies have looked at fields,
roads, or the housing of farmhands and tenant farmers. To date, urban and industrial production has also attracted less attention. For every forty studies of barns and fields, there has been only one about urban factories, workshops, offices, or corner stores as workplaces.

This book contains more essays dealing with urban subjects than any previous collection of landscape studies, in part to correct the rural-urban imbalance. Three studies in this present volume represent the continuing interest in rural space: David Lowenthal's review of agricultural landscape preservation in Europe, Jay Appleton's appeal for an approach combining both physical and cultural elements, and Reuben Rainey's analysis of the Gettysburg battlefield. Picking up the need to study both consumption and production, Deryck Holdsworth's chapter examines remote logging and fishing camps to study the relationships between masters and workers, capital and labor—an urban, industrial order for distinctly nonurban workers.

Writing about fields, factories, and slums invokes crucial but often divisive discussion of the relationships between political economy and landscape organization. Landscape meanings can be interpreted as noble, nostalgic, or uplifting expressions of choice and group life, and they can also be seen as those of economic exploitation, racism, capitalist accumulation, and a lack of choice. In this collection, James Borchart, Deryck Holdsworth, Richard Walker, and Dell Upton all grapple with ways to reveal the expressions of power within landscape development.

Anthony King's chapter connects landscape research to a Wallerstian international context of the local and the global. King reminds us that the economic and cultural processes of the United States do not stop at the nation's borders. Even in the American colonial period, local landscapes were always inextricably shaped by distant ones. Colonial and nineteenth-century immigration from Africa, Europe, and Asia gave rise to regional differences in the United States, just as twentieth-century war movements did, and transformation of capital continues to do. This multiplicity of possible locational and economic viewpoints is mirrored in the debate over multiple views of a single place.

3. Contrasts of diversity and uniformity frame essential and continuing debates within cultural landscape interpretation. A traditional strength of landscape studies has been its speculative interpretation of overarching national or regional identities. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, just as physicists sought a single, uniform field theory, cultural landscape analysts sought single, unified meanings in the American landscape. Subjects such as the rural grid, the open-lot house, and the front yard have provided clues to ideals that are close to universal. Before 1970, especially, landscape authors seemed to avoid conflict in their choice of subjects.

Yet, whatever the location—city or farm, factory or home—landscapes reveal the effects of individuals and local subcultures as well as national, dominant cultural values. The stamp of ethnicity or race on landscape elements, such as German American barns or African-American shotgun houses, has been a traditional theme in landscape studies; yet they are often studied in isolation, as if no conflict or alternatives have existed around the elements' construction, use, or rebuilding.

Since 1970, the reinterpretation of ethnicity and diversity in the United States has brought new types of writers and subjects into cultural landscape study. The new writers are less likely to search for (and hence less likely to find) a single social or cultural value in the cultural environment. They see the landscape not as one book but as multiple, coexisting texts (or in keeping with literary postmodernism) as competing fragmentary expressions. They worry over whose meanings should serve as sources in their research, and how are as likely to focus on cultural or class conflict in the landscape as on cultural unity.

In pathbreaking work, recently published, Dolores Hayden and a team of coworkers organized under the rubric of "The Power of Place" have fought for
the idea that the form of a Los Angeles bungalow, firehouse, or street corner may be much less important than its use, occupancy, and the way in which the surviving form can help present-day observers mark minority life. The exploration of ethnic and cultural diversity is also a strong theme in this volume, which includes a chapter adapted from Hayden’s book. Rina Swentzell demonstrates a dual set of cultural meanings in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico, as she evocatively compares the authoritarian, barbed-wire compound of her reservation’s Bureau of Indian Affairs school to the spaces of the pueblo which, to her, lived and breathed and were an integral part of her existence. David Chuenyuan Lai outlines the architectural and retail elements of North American Chinatowns, reinterpreting types of typical commercial buildings as multiple ethnic expressions: Anglo-American in structural shape (and often ownership), infilled with Chinese-American facades and signage. Wilbur Zelinsky, in a commentary chapter, questions Swentzell, Lai, and Hayden. Taking a view long advocated by cultural geographers, he maintains the significance of a national, pervading spatial culture that can still be seen to permeate other realms.

Jackson’s chapter in this book is typical of his approach to diversity and uniformity. He begins with the informal arrangements and activities of entertainment in working-class dwellings. He does not indicate race or ethnicity; the inhabitants might be in the rural Southwest or in Harlem. He sees diversity as a given and then searches for underlying similarities in disparate places. Next, Jackson moves to the elaborate and very formal spaces and rules of entertaining guests in middle- and upper-class houses. All this is a prelude to his larger and more abstract discussion of fundamental epochal changes in the American meaning of house, property, and land—emerging notions of access and territoriality that he suggests most Americans may eventually adopt, and many have already.

Neither the search for uniformity (as Zelinsky and Jackson see it) nor the exploration of diversity (as Hayden, Swentzell, or Lai sees it) limits or cancels the importance of the other. When both are well done, they fit together: the local scene, no matter how different from the dominant culture, still has its connections and similarities with the outside. The overarching idea, no matter how powerful, still may have its opposition. Studies of both uniformity and diversity, if they are to be helpful to American environmental consciousness, also call for a range of different publishing modes and venues.

4. Landscape studies call for popular as well as academic writing, to influence the actions of as many people as possible. The styles of writing and research in this collection stretch between two poles. On one side are essays in a literary style, aimed at the widest possible audience; on the other side are more traditionally academic articles with extensive footnotes aimed at professional scholarly audiences. The chapters by Rina Swentzell, David Chuenyuan Lai, Dell Upton, and

J. B. Jackson epitomize the literary mode; those by Reuben Rainey and Richard Wilker, the professional scholarly mode. Several chapters fall somewhere in between.

*Landscape* magazine has always preferred a literary style. Between 1951 and 1968, Jackson displayed his editorial ideal of articles written for the intelligent lay reader. The journal published virtually no articles with footnotes, even when the authors were academics. Since 1968, the second publisher of the journal, Blair Boyd, has also worked for a literary style and kept a very personal interest in every aspect of the magazine, especially making space for the original and speculative essay on a fresh topic. Also like Jackson, for more than twenty years Boyd generously has donated most of the funds needed to publish the magazine. Boyd has added an editorial board and a full-time editor; articles in the journal are now listed in several citation indexes. There are still no footnotes, although Boyd has allowed a short list of full citations for “further reading” at the end of many essays and *Landscape* continues to welcome both academic and nonacademic writers.

Whether or not they provide footnotes and close attribution of sources, academic writers remain important contributors to the cause of cultural landscape enlightenment. In 1982, landscape architects at the University of Wisconsin began a twice-yearly professional publication, *Landscape Journal*, borrowing

Fig. 5. China Camp State Historic Site, fifteen miles north of San Francisco. This fishing settlement records one variant of Chinese-American workers’ lives about 1910, including building types common to other low-income workers. Photo by Paul Groth.
closely on the design format of Landscape and aiming partly at a joint professional and public audience. Cultural landscape articles comprise a significant share of the journal’s contents. The steady sales and strong impact of two elegantly edited sets of academic articles are also notable. Donald Meinig’s collection The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes (1979) is comprised of nine long essays by senior figures in the field of cultural geography, displaying the work in that discipline up to the mid-1970s. Michael P. Conzen’s ambitious collection The Making of the American Landscape (1990) gathers the work of eighteen geographers and addresses both regional and local landscape issues of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although it is more academic than literary, it also has a dual academic and popular market.

Whether academic or not, the overarching objective of cultural landscape writing is to inform the public, and the potential applications of landscape studies are political as well as personal. The historical archaeologist James Deetz and several of his graduate students have literally uncovered and interpreted a landscape record of black and white integration in colonial South Africa. This work was begun well before such an outlook was welcomed by authorities in power. Public education projects of the American Association of Geographers and of the National Geographical Society have had strong cultural landscape components. Another venue that straddles public and professional realms is the museum world, where larger numbers of curators are beginning to consider landscape interpretation. Even the U.S. National Park Service is more actively using cultural landscape experts to interpret human history in park environs. In this collection, many of the articles are part of ongoing efforts to support more inclusive historic preservation and local interpretation. David Lowenthal’s chapter reviews the challenges created by the rural landscape’s ecologically correct, increasingly popular consideration in Europe. He argues for rural preservation concepts that take a national as well as a local approach.

For some of these advocacy roles, academic style is required. For others—especially generating understanding and support among opinion leaders—more popular styles are needed. Most needed are more “ambitious” writers such as Peirce Lewis and Robert Riley who are willing and able to address both professional and lay audiences. Whatever the audience, however, the hardest task for cultural landscape writers is choosing questions and finding appropriate and reliable ways to answer them. For these tasks, an overabundance of choice exists.

5. The many choices of theory and method in landscape studies stem from the subject’s interdisciplinary nature. To the occasional dismay of neophytes, landscape studies writers have no single approved method or theory. Some practitioners have stayed clear of the discussion of theory, while others have embraced and fought for a number of different intellectual bases. In his chapter in this volume, Jay Appleton describes the collective venture of landscape studies as “a coming together of diverse minds, trained in the thinking habits of different disciplines, many of them traditionally regarded as only remotely connected with each other.” Appleton himself argues for an approach that links geological analysis to cultural analysis.

The troublesome but essential concept of culture generates many initial complications in what Richard Walker’s present chapter calls the “enormous creative tension between cultural and material studies.” Apart from a few dissenters, the authors in this volume consider culture a changing set of social relations, rules, and meanings woven through everyday life. For them, culture is not a frozen or superorganic entity that somehow acts upon people and landscapes without their conscious action or knowledge; rather, culture is recreated or changed through individual lives. Thus, the culture of landscape studies is a culture of everyday actions and social structures, a culture that humans mold through conscious and unconscious actions, a culture in which power, class, race, ethnicity, subculture, and opposition are important considerations. Even when practitioners agree upon on a basic definition of culture, applying the concept to the study of human agency, economics, and nature generates divergent alternatives.

The inherent interdisciplinary nature of the built environment further en
riches and complicates cultural landscape method and theory. Each discipline and working group has its own rules about making its assumptions implicit or explicit. For scholars in the social sciences, for instance, theory and method must be explicit and rigorous. Novelists and nonfiction writers, however, are often allowed to keep their choices of theory and method completely implicit. Essayists and short story authors can adapt wildly different approaches within a single collection of work. In spite of (or because of) this freedom, some of the most evocative and effective landscape analyses have come from nonfiction writers such as Joan Didion, Wallace Stegner, and George Stewart; novelists such as William Faulkner and Louise Erdrich; and journalists such as Philip Langdon and Susannah Lessard.21

At the most basic level of landscape writing, one must distinguish between description (for instance, collections of data or site surveys) and interpretive studies that aim to apply or generate general principles. This dichotomy is also misleading, though, since most landscape work is a combination of description and generalization. Indeed, intelligent description—in the sense of capturing the telling elements of any landscape—is often far superior to, and more analytical than, bad theoretical generalization.

The battles between what landscape critics castigate as “merely descriptive studies” and “empty, shallow, theoretical studies” are probably strongest among American cultural geographers. It is also among geographers that landscape studies find their nineteenth-century European roots. Carl Sauer, founder of the Berkeley school of cultural geography, began promoting cultural landscape work in the 1920s and stressed field work, exhaustive reading of primary sources, and close attention to questions of migration, diffusion, the development of regional culture areas, and human interaction with the biosphere.22

Geographers influenced by the Berkeley school have spread landscape studies to at least seven other North American geography departments.23 Wilbur Zelinsky, represented in this book, is a Berkeley scion whose interests in the city and the contemporary American scene set him apart from most traditional ruralist Berkeley school scholars. Zelinsky’s Cultural Geography of the United States is a benchmark text for interest in landscape studies and has recently appeared in a new edition.24 Another Berkeley geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, exemplifies interest in “sense of place” as an explanation of landscape. Beginning with a strong attention to the methods of phenomenology, Tuan has stressed an individual and psychological approach that is common within the “place” literature.

Within human geography, theoretical views are further split between economic and cultural, Marxist and postmodern, historical and social, and yet other camps.25 In her chapter in this book, the urban historian Dolores Hayden engages the traditional definitions and uses of place with the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the “production of space.” This platform allows her to connect overarching dimensions of political economy with details of working landscapes, social group histories, and the development of specific building types.

From Britain and Canada come geographical approaches interrelated with, but also independent from, work in the United States. The masterful historian of the ordinary British landscape W. G. Hoskins has inspired detailed studies of land holdings, rural cottages, and other close documentation of present imprints left from past centuries. Hoskins in Britain plays a role like that of J. B. Jackson in the United States. British archaeologists such as Barbara Bender have gathered increasing interest in landscape as a realm of interpretation.26 The British Landscape Research Group, formed in about 1970, prides itself in having people who represent “every conceivable point of view.” It has held two dozen annual symposia, usually with an announced theme.27 The cultural historian Raymond Williams did much to infuse social theory and social class consciousness into studies of the landscape, although usually in a more literary mode than one based in detailed trench work. British geographers have extended his approaches and brought them to Canada. In his book Explorations in the Understanding of Landscape, the Canadian geographer William Norton elegantly outlines at least four
types of cultural landscape study, strongly influenced by the landscape views of the English geographer Peter Jackson. Between the United States and Britain, and between different schools of thought, the definition of the word landscape varies. For some British writers (as shown by Jay Appleton and Denis Cosgrove in this book), landscape is not so much cultural space but rather a scene or view; Barbara Bender’s use is more spatial.

Architects, landscape architects, and design historians also have contributed method and theory to cultural landscape studies. With his first book, Common Landscape of America, Harvard University’s John Stilgoe extended and made more available the first half of Jackson’s famous survey lecture courses in landscape architecture at Berkeley and Harvard. In the 1990s, the largest student audience for landscape studies is found in nine design schools where survey courses have been consistently taught. The Vernacular Architecture Forum, a six-hundred-member organization founded in 1980, has attracted many landscape-oriented writers, researchers, and architecture preservationists to its annual meetings and publications.

Designers and design historians have been less bound than geographers by the necessity for using systematic theory. When drawn to it, they tend to be sympathetic with concurrent theoretical leanings in art history and literary criticism, lately represented by postmodernism. Denis Cosgrove’s chapter in this book takes the postmodernist route, addressing landscape through Renaissance paintings and using critical literary theory as a mode of analysis.

In history departments, interest in social or economic history varies from avid (among social and labor historians) to much less (among most urban and cultural historians). Relatively few historians identify their interests as built space; yet, when their work explains the spatial aspects of human history, historians have been and continue to be significant contributors to cultural landscape studies. The historian James Borchert, for instance, uses classical historical methods and written sources. In this collection, his study of the Lakewood section of Cleveland uses lots, buildings, and continuing neighborhoods as additional primary evidence for Lakewood’s development. His close readings of maps, photographs, and other evidence of spatial patterns resemble the methods of geographers. Another contributor to this collection, Reuben Rainey, also crosses methodological lines. Rainey is a landscape architect historian; therefore, readers might expect a detailed annotation of form. Instead, in this particular work, he uses more textual than visual information to reconstruct the processes that have created and altered our understanding of Gettysburg as a national monument.

By deliberately collecting such varied theoretical possibilities, this volume hopes to make possible at least a bracing immersion in the methodological gene pool. A complete account of the interdisciplinary nature of landscape studies would include contributors in sociology, literature, material culture studies, American studies, photography, and film—each with its own shifting sets of theory and method. Perhaps there should never be orthodoxy in study with such varied subjects and audiences.

Within cultural landscape methods, the primacy of visual and spatial information is a central theme, even though not all landscape interpretation is based on visual and spatial data. Much of the immediacy, interest, and emotional appeal of landscape study—for writers as well as for readers—rests on the immediacy of cultural environments: the landscape is directly accessible and makes abstract processes more concrete and knowable. This is true both for visual information (images and scenes as they appear to the viewer’s eye) and for the more abstract domain of “spatial information” (representing the underlying organizations and interrelations of space—local, regional, or global—which may be based on visual information but are not strictly visible).

For designers and geographers, the importance of the visual is often axiomatic, and two important articles by geographers cogently review the case: Donald W. Meinig’s “Environmental Appreciation: Localities as Human Art” is both a summary and an appeal for site-based interpretation; Prince Lewis’s “Axioms for Reading the Landscape” sets out closely reasoned guides and principles for landscape study. David Lowenthal has spoken of the rapid increase in the avail
ability of and interest in images, beginning with the nineteenth-century explosion of lithographs and photographs, and continuing with today's video and computer technologies. Compared to people of earlier times, Americans can now easily retrieve and manipulate their place experiences with a wide range of drawings, photographs, maps, and other images. Lowenthal notes that formerly "fleeting and unverifiable private impressions" have been transformed into a permanent, retrievable, "well-known consensual visual world."35

Because the goal of good landscape analysis is both seeing and thinking, the seeming ease of looking and its impressionistic nature have generated concern. Admittedly, visual information at times has been distracting, trivial, or irrelevant in understanding essential human concerns. In much fashionable academic discourse of the twentieth century, the visual has been denigrated.36 In his essay in this book, Richard Walker reiterates complaints about the Berkeley school's "obsessional interest in culture-as-artifact" and searches for common methodological ground between a spatial approach and other theoretical foundations.37

Furthermore, taking visual and spatial information seriously has at times marginalized cultural landscape studies among academics. Cultural landscape's visual impetus contrasts sharply with strictly logocentric work done by other cultural analysts. In the logocentric view, truly intelligent writers work with written texts, not objects; people who put pictures or maps in their books, and who write clearly, are somehow inferior. The critics of visual inspiration, Lowenthal notes, often reject spatial information and instead insist that scholars should "probe deeply hidden structures, seek out the covert agendas of those in power, and engage in historical, economic, and sociological exegesis." He adds that for the critics, "genuinely serious inquiry" should be non-visual, hard to read, strictly austere.38

Another source of criticism of visual and spatial information is superficial fieldwork. As a method, cultural geographers especially stress the importance of personal fieldwork: going out and looking closely at landscapes to find spatial cues, site-specific interrelationships, and insights to use in sifting through written records. Good (and bad) fieldwork can extend between two extremes: wide-ranging and fairly rapid "windshield surveys" to sense a cross-section of the city, region, or nation; and more painstaking and detailed studies involving on-site sketching to understand the form and composition of landscapes, the measurement and drawing of buildings, gathering of local interviews and written information, and thorough mapping or systematic photography. Unfortunately, hasty or thinly conceived windshield surveys have at times become a shallow basis for cultural analysis. Although such work may be no more frequent than hasty analyses of written sources, it remains more memorable in the minds of critics.

Surely, spatial emphases and fieldwork do not replace the need for rigorous traditional research in print and archival sources.39 Dell Upton's essay here holds up both the seen and the unseen as important; analyzing one without the other, he says, can lead to seriously incomplete conclusions. In another study in this book, Derek Holdsworth asks about the reliability of visual information and reminds us that other sources of information may overrule the importance of the visual. He warns that present-day images may not accurately convey past reality, and for that reason he has chosen not to include any illustrations with his chapter. Perhaps his sharpest objections are reserved not for the use of spatial or visual information (which he himself uses) but for the questions and research agendas chosen by previous generations of landscape scholars.

Nonetheless, the primacy of studying the actual landscape, as a method, remains critically important. As Lowenthal puts it, "Seeing is essential, even when it does not entail believing."40 Spatial and visual information often sparks new and important questions, suggested by oppositions and juxtapositions not apparent in written records. There is nothing particularly easy or automatically facile about intelligently interpreting built space. Rather than being an easy substitute for work with written sources, spatial and visual analysis usually requires additional work. The heavily illustrated article or course lecture often takes twice as much time to prepare as the mere verbal lecture; the ideas of the text must be written,
then the ideas of the visual evidence assembled, and then the two parts intertwined. On-site, rigorous preparation and attention are demanded in order to know where to look and how to interpret what is seen. The tasks typically require the collection of expensive and cumbersome site information and photographs. The highest compliment many landscape writers can give to their colleagues is to say that “their eyes are well connected to their brains.”

Such visual emphases have also been taken very seriously in the past. In her essay in this volume, Catherine Howett portrays the visual primacy of modernism—and also of some cultural landscape studies—as the last gasps of the authority accorded to vision by the Renaissance elite, whose spurious objective science gave visual experience a dominance over the other senses, and whose perspective drawing held that single viewing points should be favored.

J. B. Jackson’s Work as Guide and Comparison

Taken together, the frameworks of landscape studies—concerning the boundaries of the field, appropriate subjects for study, the search of uniformity versus diversity, questions of audience, deliberations over theory and method, and debates about the importance of spatial information—will continue to include multiple positions. In the work of John Brinckerhoff Jackson we can see one person’s decisions within these six frameworks. The most creative and perceptive collections of cultural landscape interpretation in the United States remain the seven books of Jackson’s own essays. Indeed, Jackson’s work serves not only as an initial point (as with his editing of Landscape magazine) but also as a continuing reference point within cultural landscape studies. Whenever the newest writers, including those in this collection, stretch the boundaries of the field, they are usually redrawing frameworks explored and enunciated by Jackson.

As an editor and writer, Jackson eloquently asserted the importance of everyday landscapes: “Over and over again I have said that the commonplace aspects of the contemporary landscape, the streets and houses and fields and places of work, could teach us a great deal not only about American history and American society, but about ourselves and how we relate to the world . . . . 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.”42 At the heart of the field, as Jackson set it, is the exploration and speculation about meaning, especially for present-day inhabitants. Jackson made clear that he was interested in influencing change as well as preservation; he wrote that he worked for “a vision disciplined enough to distinguish what is wrong in the landscape and should be changed from what is worthy of protection.”43

Jackson did much to spark interest in the importance of ordinary landscape, especially among geographers and environmental designers. On his first visit to Berkeley (in 1956), Jackson sought out Carl Sauer and met the entire geography faculty; he stayed to have a strong influence on the department and the Berkeley school of geography in North America. So, too, a large part of the interest in landscape studies among architects and landscape architects was sparked by Jackson’s teaching in the design schools at both Berkeley and Harvard between 1967 and 1978. Jackson’s choice of working with designers and planners stemmed in part from his interest in affecting public and private decisions about the landscape.44

On the choice of appropriate subjects, Jackson has shown nearly universal curiosity about both rural and urban human environments. In the first issue of Landscape, Jackson wrote that the magazine was to be a place to “learn of country things.” Nonetheless, for Jackson the height of alienation was not separation from wilder nature but lack of interest in human culture in either the city or the countryside. Landscape’s thread of urban topics began with the second issue; by the fourth issue there were more urban topics than rural ones.45 In the 1950s, as a guest seminar instructor in the Berkeley geography department, Jackson audited not only Carl Sauer’s decidedly antiurban seminars but also the seminars where Jean Gottmann was hammering out his ideas for Megalopolis.46

Jackson also kept in view both production and consumption landscapes. He often wrote about landscapes of economic difficulty and unfairness, of the hardworking farmer, propertyless workers in their pickup trucks, and of urban working landscapes—especially in midsize cities—and the need to study them. Typically wary of merely economic explanations, Jackson usually suggested and rarely directly argued causation. He often sought out the social psychology and religious aspects of landscapes.47

Addressing the contrasts of uniformity and diversity, Jackson often emphasized the ethnic contrasts of the Southwest, but also looked for abstract ideas and public physical settings (such as the rural grid, the city street, the commercial highway strip) that link disparate human groups rather than separate them. Jackson is also known for associating seemingly unrelated landscape phenomena, such as the changes in highway strips with changes in the American suburban house, and changes in the organization of field lines with changes in the interiors of barns. Recently, when he drew comparisons between uniformity and diversity, he pointed out the opposition between what he called the “vernacular” and “official” worlds, defined in part by income and access to decision-making power.

When he commented on writing style and audience, Jackson despaired at the “totally academic style—dry, without color or detail, stifled by footnotes—written only for a small public of scholars who may (or more likely may not) see the work’s landscape potential.” He added that “without our being aware of it, here
in the U.S. we have developed an attractive, intelligent type of middle-brow informative writing—whether in the Wall Street Journal, the New Republic, the Atlantic, or the New York Times magazine section—that ought to indicate to the academy that ideas can be given style, and consequent circulation.”49 In his own writings, Jackson held close to an engaging Emersonian essay style, with a minimal discussion of sources.

Jackson carefully resisted making his methods or use of theory too explicit, although both method and theory were important to him. He worked for analysis, as he put it, as “straightforward and as little systematized as possible,” with an “exploratory and speculative point of view.”49 As phrased by Donald W. Meinig, in Jackson's style “all is assertion and argument, . . . much is observed, nothing is measured.”50 Jackson's essay in this collection is typical. He builds from qualitative data—historical research, observations of behavior, photographs, and chance conversations. Although he based his studies on careful reading and observation of the American landscape, Jackson did not typically present readers with detailed case studies of actual farms, towns, or cities. Instead, he constructed evocative generic types.51

For someone who was supposedly “not theoretical,” Jackson also could be highly theoretical. As part of his search for explanation and meaning, he was always an avid reader of academic theory. Directly and obliquely, Jackson constantly suggested regularities, patterns, causes, relationships, and universals. Although he invoked few theoretical systems to support his generalizations, theory was very much present between the lines. When Jackson read a source that was neither spatial nor concerned with material culture at any scale, he creatively gave the work landscape applications. For instance, for his class lectures on recreation spaces, Jackson transformed Roger Caillois's four mostly nonspatial categories of recreation experience into spatial landscape terms; and Michel Foucault's Order of Things clearly seems to have influenced Jackson's notion of abstract landscape orders.52

In spite of his own avid interest in observing and recording the American landscape, Jackson insisted that, for him, the final object of landscape study was not visual form. Nonetheless, the visual is always in his work. Often he carefully chose illustrations or made diagrams and drawings to clarify his thinking and to accompany his essays. He never said that the visual information of the landscape was unimportant; rather, it was not the automatic first priority for discerning meaning. To guard against overemphasis on vision, he consistently emphasized nonvisual sensory inputs. Whenever possible, he avoided travel by automobile and instead traveled by motorcycle, not only for greater mobility but also to engage his other senses, most particularly smell and a kinesthetic sense of road texture and terrain. He collected his students’ records of everyday sensory experience.53 He said that he looked for telltale details such as “the sound of snow shovels after a blizzard, the smell of wet bathing suits, the sensation of walking barefoot on the hot pavement.” Such fleeting memories as these, he added, “often make a whole landscape, a whole season, vivid and unforgettable.” In his desk work of analysis and writing, Jackson stated that he “persist[ed]” in seeing landscape not “as a scenic or ecological entity but as a political or cultural entity, changing in the course of history.” For him, landscapes were social constructs, not collected individual designs. The landscape, Jackson wrote, is not a work of art; traditional aesthetic criticisms are out of place in landscape studies. “Landscape,” he said, “must be regarded first of all in terms of living rather than looking.”54 In this, he exhibited a genuinely radical stance within the enterprise of landscape studies.

Although Jackson was clear and consistent in his personal approach to landscape studies, the editorial directions he set for Landscape magazine and his constant and wide-ranging personal reading habits revealed a search for and close regard of other people’s approaches. Indeed, when Jackson opened Landscape magazine by alluding to the open book of the landscape, he did not write that there was One Best Way to read it. The multiplicity of voices and approaches in cultural landscape studies has brought not incoherence but a flexible, diverse strength. Challenging the cultural ignorance of the American population—helping very different schools of fish to see the water that surrounds and supports them—thus calls for diverse approaches and remains exciting and important.