Common Landscapes as Historic Documents

Peirce Lewis

Tangible objects form a challenging and stubborn kind of historic record. They challenge us because they are there—and because we know, as an article of faith, that those objects have meaning, if we are only clever enough to decipher it. They are stubborn because they simply refuse to go away, by their very presence demanding to be interpreted. To human geographers no form of material artifact is more stubborn, more tantalizing, or potentially more illuminating than the vast disorderly collection of human artifacts that constitute the cultural landscape.

The idea is simple to define but daunting in the enormity of its scope. By *cultural landscape* geographers mean the total assemblage of visible things that human beings have done to alter the face of the earth—their shappings of the earth.
with mines and quarries and dams and jetties; the ubiquitous purposeful manipulation of the earth's vegetative cover in farms, forests, lawns, parks, and gardens; the things humans build on the earth, cities and towns, houses and barns, factories and office buildings; the spaces we create for worship and for play. Cultural landscape includes the roads and machines we build to transport objects and ideas, the fences and walls we erect to subdivide land into manageable units and separate portions of the earth from one another, the monuments we build to celebrate ourselves, our institutions, our heroes, and our ancestors. Cultural landscape, in short, is everything that humans do to the natural earth for whatever purpose but most commonly for material profit, aesthetic pleasure, spiritual fulfillment, personal comfort, or communal safety.  

Human landscapes differ in appearance from place to place for the self-evident reason that all cultures have certain collective ambitions about the way the world should operate and because they possess peculiar means of achieving those goals of profit, pleasure, and safety. Simply because cultures are peculiar, their landscapes are peculiar too. And, of course, because cultures change through time, their landscapes also change. Those landscapes become in effect a kind of document, a kind of cultural autobiography that humans have carved and continue to carve into the surface of the earth.

It follows, necessarily, that if landscape is a document, we ought to be able to read it in a manner analogous to the way we read written documents. We are driven to try to read the language of landscape partly because it is the primary evidence created by people who often left behind no written records of their day-to-day activities and partly because there is so much of it that the validity of its messages can be tested by that most powerful of tests—internal consistency. It does not follow, however, that cultural landscape is an easy document to read, nor does it follow that it is complete. It was, after all, not meant to be read, nor are people accustomed to reading it. Large parts of the document are missing (especially the older parts), and our contemporaries are constantly messing with what remains—altering it, erasing it, redesigning it. Cultural landscape has many of the qualities of a gigantic palimpsest, a huge ragged informal document written by a host of people with various levels of literacy, repeatedly erased and amended by people with different motives and different tools at their disposal. Rarely, however, did the creators of landscape think of themselves as writing a document, nor did they suspect that anyone would try to read it. This quality of artlessness is, to a large degree, what makes cultural landscape such a rich document but also such a valuable one.

But how can one learn to read cultural landscape? What can one expect to learn from the exercise? And how can one test the validity of ideas based on evidence from that landscape?

LEARNING BY DOING: READING THE LANDSCAPE OF A SMALL TOWN

I have been wrestling with these problems for more than twenty years. Every year at Pennsylvania State University I teach an introductory course on the American cultural landscape to a hundred or so undergraduate students, none of them tutored in these matters. The students come from all over campus—from architecture and landscape architecture, mathematics and history, electrical engineering and dairy husbandry; they are, in effect, a random grab from the population of a very large public university. It has not occurred to many of those students that landscape is something other than a disorderly assemblage of miscellaneous objects. To most of them landscape is merely something to cast their eyes across—sometimes in approval, sometimes in disgust—but most often to take for granted, except when particular items in the landscape impinge on ordinary day-to-day life—the location of dormitories and classrooms and dining halls, the pattern of streets and paths that lead most efficiently to a favorite bookstore or disco or pizza joint or romantic liaison. Except under unusual circumstances most students view ordinary landscape simply as a time-consuming obstacle that lies between where they are and where they want to be, to be crossed as quickly as possible but otherwise ignored. It almost never occurs to those students—as it almost never occurs to most Americans—to look at that landscape questioningly, to inquire how it came to be, to ask what it has to tell us about the folk who made it: ourselves and our cultural ancestors.

My job with those students is simple to state but not so easy to execute: to persuade them that landscape can be read and that the enterprise is worth undertaking. Most students are skeptical of both propositions. They do not believe that landscape can be read, partly because it has never occurred to them but, more important, because they have never seen anybody do it. It has never occurred to them that the human land-
scape can be viewed as a form of cultural autobiography—a source of ideas and information about themselves and their society that is often hard to obtain in other ways.

Over a good many years of teaching the course I have discovered only one effective means of persuading them, and that is to take them physically into that landscape and show them during the course of a one-day field trip what a finite bit of that world has to teach them. Before we sally forth, I ask them to arm themselves with a bit of vocabulary, having mainly to do with the history of American architecture and building technology, and then follow me around for a day while we jointly ask questions about what we see, trying to get some reasonable answers and trying, insofar as we can, to test those answers to see if they are valid.

The place we go to try out these ideas is a small town about a dozen miles from my university campus, a place called Bellefonte, Pennsylvania. Its population is not quite ten thousand, so it is small enough that the mind can get around it and the eye can grasp it as a whole. But it is complex enough to be challenging and old enough (it was founded about two hundred years ago) to contain a good deal of historical diversity. Like many small towns, it does a fair variety of things. It is the county seat of Centre County, and it has been an economic and social hub for a good-sized and fairly prosperous farming district. From time to time it has had its share of manufacturing, chiefly a lively iron industry that flourished for much of the nineteenth century. In sum, it is fairly typical of many semianonymous small American towns.

This essay is a vicarious trip to Bellefonte and is aimed to demonstrate a few things that a common American landscape can reveal. There is some risk in trying to do this. To condense into a short printed essay what takes about eight hours of constant looking and talking and thinking to show the students obviously runs some risk of caricature. And a few black-and-white illustrations cannot really do justice to the multicolored three-dimensional variety and complexity of the real landscape. (Indeed, photographs taken from a single perspective and framed by linear borders cannot help but pull things out of context, something that one constantly seeks to avoid in an enterprise where context is crucial to the understanding of the subject.) But, at the risk of caricaturing the town or, even worse, caricaturing the act of landscape reading, what follows is a small sample of the things one can see on a one-day excursion into the ordinary cultural landscape of an American small town.

PUTTING THINGS IN CONTEXT: THREE LEVELS OF MAGNIFICATION

If there is a single rule about the interpretation of landscape (or any other artifact for that matter), it is, I submit, to view it in its context of place and time—of geography and history, if you please. Context, of course, is what pathologists look for when they examine cells under a microscope at a low level of magnification but with a large field of vision. Before looking at the details of a cell, pathologists want to see where the cell is, what kind of tissue is around it. Only when they understand that are they ready to increase the level of magnification and look in detail at the cell's internal anatomy.

We approach Bellefonte in the same way by getting two composite bird's-eye views of the town from nearby hilltops—one at a considerable distance, another closer in. Only then do we descend into the streets of the town for a final close-up look.

Fortunately for this exercise, Bellefonte is a fairly hilly place, and a good view of the town can be had from several hilltops nearby. That is not always the case, of course, and that is why students of landscape typically start an exercise of this kind by seeking out a vantage point—a high building or firetower perhaps—to obtain a composite view of the place to be studied. Maps and aerial photographs, of course, serve much the same purpose (fig. 1). At various scales they are wonderfully useful devices to help us simplify and generalize our ideas about large complicated places and, above all, to see them in their larger geographic context.

Two Views from a Distance

From the top of a hill in the prosperous farmland outside Bellefonte one can get a sweeping view of the town and its surroundings (fig. 2). Even at this low level of magnification one can make some educated guesses about the place. The town commands the entrance of a gap in a mountain ridge where a little stream has cut a notch through that ridge. It requires little imagination to guess that the town's prosperity, such as it is, has derived from command of transportation routes through that gap. Prima facie the town seems to be a market center and, one is inclined to guess, a social center too, like so many other American towns that grew up at the junction of roads. What else it may be this distant view does not reveal, but it
Fig. 1. Maps are singularly useful devices not merely to show where things are located but also to place them in their geographic contexts. This figure is excerpted from the U.S. Geological Survey's 1908 "Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, Quadrangle" (1:62,500) and shows the town's location with respect to Bald Eagle Mountain, which bisects the map WSW-ENE. Notice the funneling of roads, railroads, and waterways through the watergap carved by Spring Creek between Milsburg and Bellefonte. All photographs in this chapter by Peirce Lewis.

Fig. 2. Panoramic view of Bellefonte from a hilltop about a mile south of town. Rising beyond the town is Bald Eagle Mountain, broken by the water gap carved by Spring Creek (left middleground). The command of routes through the gap gave Bellefonte its economic and social reason for being; like most American cities and towns, it prospered because it commanded a route junction.

invites questions that can be answered only by stepping up the level of magnification and getting a closer view of the town.

From a second hilltop, Half Moon Hill, a knoll that overlooks the railroad station and commercial district, one can make out the general outlines of the town's main industrial, commercial, and residential districts. In the foreground, along Spring Creek and the railroad tracks, is a string of large nineteenth-century industrial buildings, many apparently in an advanced state of decay. (We wonder about what kind of industry flourished there and why it is no more, and we remind ourselves to take a closer look at the banks of the creek when we descend into the town.) On the edge of that industrial district, also near the creek, is the railroad station. The town's main street, High Street, leads uphill from the railroad
to the courthouse, a commanding white building with a self-consciously classical porch. Much of the commercial district is strung out along High Street between the railroad station and courthouse. Even at this distance one suspects that those two buildings served as functional anchors—politics at one end of the street, commerce at the other. Indeed, from the hilltop one can make out two bulky hotels: one (the Bush House) across the street from the railroad station, the other (the Brockerhoff) across the street from the courthouse. One is inclined to guess that the railroad hotel might have served commercial travelers—drummers and the like. Equally, it seems plausible that the courthouse hotel was the seat of a good deal of unofficial political activity.

On the hills beyond the commercial district rises the town’s main residential area. Even from this distant hilltop there is evidence of residential segregation. To the left (the north side of town) the residential area is a bucolic kind of place, and one can spot the characteristic profile of Norway spruces, a tree much beloved by high-style romantic landscape designers of the late nineteenth-century in America. This man-made forest is punctured by several church steeples and mansard roofs, green with verdigris—signs of Victorian money and Victorian good taste. To the right (the south side of town), however, the residential area of Bellefonte is substantially different, even though it lies about the same distance from the center of town and one presumes that it was built about the same time. Landscaping is scantier, and the fashionable late Victorian architecture is totally absent. From the hilltop it is hard to make out much detail, but most of the houses on the south side of town are blocky, unadorned, rectangular two-story houses—the I-houses and watered-down Georgians that had been fashionable in colonial and early national Pennsylvania but had gone out of style among the affluent elite by the time of the Civil War (fig. 3). In short, the north side of Bellefonte was keeping up nicely with late nineteenth-century national styles, as one would expect in the establishment part of town (fig. 4). But Victorian fashion evidently did not reach the south side, and one is led to guess at a substantial schism between the establishment north side and the working-class south side. To be sure, both are parts of the same town, but one suspects that they occupied two very different worlds—different incomes, different ethnic backgrounds, different religions, and different social structures.

Later on, when we descend into the town, those guesses will be corroborated. The fashionable churches of north-side Bellefonte are all establishment Protestant denominations, while the churches of south-side Belle-
temporarily in the Union Army is listed), but there are no Italian names on the rolls and few Irish names. One must conclude that early nineteenth-century Bellefonte was inhabited largely by Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and it is natural to suppose that during the nineteenth century at least and perhaps later the town’s affluent elite derived from that group.

Maximum Magnification: The View from High Street

We can learn more about the history of Bellefonte by descending from our lofty perch into the streets of the town. By so doing we raise the level of magnification one last notch to discover what can be learned along the three-block stretch of High Street between the railroad station and the courthouse—in effect, the old center of the town.

The railroad station itself, a modest but respectable Stick Style building with Queen Anne touches, plainly dates to somewhere around the beginning of the twentieth century. Across the street is the Bush House Hotel, a substantial four-story Italianate building that bears a blue plastic sign proclaiming it was built in 1868. Historic signs made of plastic are not always the most reliable sources of information, but this one seems plausible. The architectural style is right for the Civil War decade. Furthermore, for a hotel obviously associated with the railroad station the date is consistent with what we know about American railroad history. The Pennsylvania Railroad’s Main Line was finished between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh in the mid-1850s, and it makes sense that branch lines were built to outlying places like Bellefonte within a few years. The size and modest grandeur of the Bush House, in short, is a measure of the railroad’s impact on the town’s economy, and its dignified facade allows us to conclude that the railroad brought not just money but ideas of Victorian style as well. The railroad, in short, was not merely an economic shot in the arm but also Bellefonte’s window on a larger world of ideas and style.

The present railroad station, however, clearly was built twenty or thirty years later than the hotel, and one has to suppose that it was an updating of an earlier station. From the look of the new station Bellefonte as late as the 1890s was trying to keep up with national and international styles of the times and doing so with some success.

A century ago this zone between the hotel and the railroad station was surely a hive of economic and social activity. Today is another story. The railroad station is closed and has been taken over by the Chamber of Commerce, which is using it for offices. The hotel is closed too, except for its bar and dining room, and its current owners have painted the exterior and added the plastic signs, as well as some Williamsburg embellishments obviously meant to signify its historicity. Unlike the original designers of these buildings, who knew very well what they were doing, the current custodians have a fuzzier idea of style and history. Since 1868, one suspects, at least some of the connections with the world of ideas have come unplugged.

Today, the immediate environs of the hotel and railroad station are fairly bleak. The ground floor of the hotel contains a row of shop windows, but only about half of the shops are occupied and those by low-rent occupants: a county relief agency and a cut-rate optometrist. Across the street, in sharp contrast with the Italianate elegance of the hotel, are an ill-tended and optimistically large parking lot and a city park. The park has been planted with grass and a few trees and furnished with a newly built gazebo and a civic fountain. Both park and parking lot are fairly
But it was no paradise either. The county historical society, of course, makes much of Bellefonte’s architectural treasures and for good reason. Many are substantial and sophisticated. Along High Street, however, there are elements of the landscape that lead one to suspect that wealth and sophistication were not unmixed blessings. Three institutions, all located within a block of the courthouse, are familiar features in the American small-town landscape: the BPOE, the YMCA, and the WCTU. It is easy to dismiss them all as quaint or insignificant; none seems to possess much social relevance in these closing days of the twentieth century. But it is worth recalling what each of those three institutions did and the social pathologies that each reflected. In nineteenth-century America each performed different functions from those they do today, and taken together their presence on High Street tells a somber story about this picturesque little town.

Consider the BPOE, for example. The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks was founded for the same reason that the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Red Men, and the Woodmen of the World were founded—to care for the widows and orphans of members who had been killed in accidents or died of typhoid and to provide dignified Christian burials that a fatherless family without life insurance could not readily afford. Those fraternal lodges were, in effect, the precursors of life insurance companies and social security agencies. They were invented to help rural folk, who were flocking from farms into the new cities of industrializing America, cope with the unfamiliar physical and social hazards of new cities and new factories—in effect, cope with a whole new society that was being born before their eyes. It was a society that offered unforeseen opportunities but unforeseen perils as well, a cruel, dangerous society in which heretofore rural people needed protection and needed it badly. The BPOE was just one form of such protection.

Across the street the YMCA performed a similar function. Undergraduate students at my university grew up in a twentieth-century world where the YMCA is commonly viewed as a place of recreation for adolescents and where children are taken by their parents on Saturday mornings to learn how to swim. But in the nineteenth century the YMCA was a crucially important institution. It provided safe haven for innocent young men, fresh from the farm, who had come to find new jobs but found as well a quite pathological urban environment. This environment offered opportunities that the overcrowded farmland did not, which is, of course, why the young men came. (Young women came too, and they formed the YWCA.) But the burgeoning cities and towns of nineteenth-century America were easy places for those fresh-faced farm boys and girls to lose their money, their virtue, their health, and even their lives. The YMCA and the YWCA sought to avert such disasters by providing the young single newcomer a clean safe place to sleep, cheap nourishing meals, and some protection against the evils of the street. It is worth remembering that syphilis and gonorrhea were not joking matters before the invention of sulfa drugs and penicillin. The YMCA’s safe Christian environment was not a luxury for young people in nineteenth-century American towns: It was an indispensable form of protection against an environment that those innocent rural youngsters had never seen before.

Across the street the WCTU building gives evidence of yet another pathology (fig. 9). The history of prohibition in the United States is a complicated business. One would hardly know that, however, by listening to contemporary pop historians, who have persuaded many Americans (including most of my students) that Prohibition was a silly experiment, imposed on the nation by ignorant extremists. According to that same story, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union was largely a collection of hatchet-wielding fanatics.

The WCTU headquarters on High Street in Bellefonte casts considerable doubt on the premises of that pop history. The building, which bears a 1903 date stone, is a large, formal brick and brownstone pile, which bespeaks money, taste, and serious purpose. Under the WCTU sign one would hardly know that the Woodmen of the World were founded to care for the widows and orphans of members who had come to new cities and new factories—to find new jobs but find as well quite pathological urban environment. This environment offered opportunities that the overcrowded farmland did not, which is, of course, why the young men came. (Young women came too, and they formed the YWCA.) But the burgeoning cities and towns of nineteenth-century America were easy places for those fresh-faced farm boys and girls to lose their money, their virtue, their health, and even their lives. The YMCA and the YWCA sought to avert such disasters by providing the young single newcomer a clean safe place to sleep, cheap nourishing meals, and some protection against the evils of the street. It is worth remembering that syphilis and gonorrhea were not joking matters before the invention of sulfa drugs and penicillin. The YMCA’s safe Christian environment was not a luxury for young people in nineteenth-century American towns: It was an indispensable form of protection against an environment that those innocent rural youngsters had never seen before.

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Fig. 9. Petriken Hall, the WCTU Building, bears a date stone of 1903. It bespeaks money, taste, and serious purpose.

of early and mid-nineteenth-century houses are workable things, and they mean business (fig. 10). They are picturesque enough today, and on the town’s well-polic ed streets they are seldom closed. But they do close, and they do work, and one can surmise that in a nineteenth-century town that required the BPOE and the YMCA and the WCTU all in the space of one block to deal with just a few of its social pathologies those shutters were put there for a reason.

Fig. 10. Shutters for street-level windows. The house, which fronts on High Street only a block from the courthouse and the majesty of the law, dates to the early nineteenth century, a time when urban shutters needed to be shuttable. Urban lawlessness did not originate in the twentieth century.
LESSONS FROM THE LANDSCAPE

High Street in Bellefonte is not unique among the main streets of small-town America, and Bellefonte is not unique either. But that is precisely the point. Its ordinary human landscape has things to tell us, not only about one small town in the mountains of central Pennsylvania but also about the larger world of nineteenth-century America. There is evidence all up and down the street that the urbanization of nineteenth-century America was more than just a change in scale of economic enterprise, more than just a shift in population. The Bellefontes of the nineteenth century were often rich, exhilarating places, but they were also wrenching, dangerous places for a nation that, to borrow Richard Hofstadter's words, was born in the country and moved to the city.6 It was more than just a move from one place to another; Americans, after all, have always been on the move. This was a move from one world to another. And the Bellefontes of America formed crucial stepping stones on America's century-long conversion from a rural world to an urban one.

But that move is over now, and the landscape of Bellefonte's main street makes it obvious that the currents of history have swirled by the town and left it on the shore, beached, like so much other historical detritus in America's throw-away society. Many of its downtown store windows are empty; its downtown parking lots stand waiting for cars that seldom come; buildings such as its old opera house command rents so low that a cut-rate furniture store has taken up residence there and a wholesale beer distributor has its warehouse at the rear (fig. 11). Both these enterprises are (to use the jargon of social science) space-consumptive, which is simply another way of saying that in a prosperous place rents would long since have forced them to the outskirts, where land is cheap. If the WCTU and BPOE are indicators of nineteenth-century social pathology, the location of a wholesale beer distributor and a large cut-rate furniture store on what ought to be prime commercial land is an equally clear sign of twentieth-century economic pathology.

An essay such as this can only hint at the wealth of information that the landscape of a place such as Bellefonte contains. But it suggests, perhaps, some of the benefits and some of the problems of trying to read history from the evidence of ordinary human landscapes.

The benefits, I think, are clear enough. Information derived from direct observation of landscape is, in the old-fashioned sense of the term, primary data; in fact, it is hard to imagine any data that are more primary. Just as important, the data are abundant—indeed, sometimes superfluously abundant beyond any scholar's reasonable needs. But that abundance allows us to assemble huge bodies of data that by their very volume are convincing. Finally, and of surpassing value, the data are in their geographical context. By and large, things are where they were with respect to one another, albeit with some notable exceptions. As geographers have been insisting for a long time, location matters.

And what are the limitations, the defects, in this material geographical record? In my own work and that of fellow landscape readers the most serious defects are likely to reside in ourselves—the occasional failure to
remember that landscape, like any artifact, is an incomplete record, that we cannot hope to write a complete history of any place on the basis of artifacts outdoors, any more than archaeologists can hope to write a complete history of Troy, no matter how deeply they may dig, no matter how thoroughly they may sift the diggings. A huge volume of material is simply gone. There is, as well, a common temptation to be glib: to assert relationships between artifact and idea that the evidence itself simply does not support. Rarely in the real world of material objects does "this" mean "that."

Then, too, no scholar can expect to ask questions of the landscape or to get reasonable answers without prior knowledge and without preparation. J. Hoover Mackin, late professor of geomorphology at the University of Washington and perhaps the most brilliant fieldworker I have ever had the privilege of knowing, used to tell his students, "What you get out of fieldwork is in exact proportion to the knowledge you take into the field." Landscape will not provide answers to questions that are not asked, and it cannot be expected to provide good answers unless questions are carefully and intelligently framed. The wise student of landscape reads deeply, thinks long, and plans carefully before sallying forth into the complicated world of geographic reality.

Finally, as with any other method of historical inquiry, reading evidence from landscape demands a constant willingness to be skeptical. Like most artifacts, common landscapes pose more questions than they are likely to answer. But such questions, in turn, can be among the most powerful tools a scholar can possess. Sometimes they force us to look again, to seek other evidence that can corroborate or contradict our hypotheses; sometimes they send us back to the archives to see what others have said about the things we can only suspect on the street; inevitably they send us out to seek first-hand information through careful interviews with knowledgeable old-timers and look again at things we had previously only glanced at.

But in the last analysis, I think, the attempt to derive meaning from common human landscapes possesses one overwhelming virtue. It keeps us constantly alert to the world around us, demanding that we pay attention not just to some of the things around us but to all of them—the whole visible world in all of its rich, glorious, messy, confusing, ugly, and beautiful complexity.

And that, to my way of thinking, may be its greatest virtue.

NOTES


2. My course is not unique. Although I know of no university department formally called landscape studies, a small informal band of scholars teaches a variety of similar courses elsewhere in various university departments; examples are those taught by Paul Groth in the landscape architecture department at the University of California at Berkeley, John Stilgoe in the American studies department at Harvard University, John Jakle in the geography department at the University of Illinois, and John Fraser Hart in the geography department at the University of Minnesota. There are many others, but most owe their contemporary form to the pioneer work of John Brinckerhoff Jackson, founder of the magazine Landscape and its editor from 1951 to 1968 and himself the teacher of celebrated courses at Berkeley and Harvard. The single best appreciation of Jackson and his work is Donald Meinig's "Reading the Landscape: An Appreciation of W. G. Hoskins and J. B. Jackson," in D. W. Meinig, ed., The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscape (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 195–244. Meinig's essay contains a fairly complete bibliography of Jackson's seminal work up to 1978.


5. For an excellent account of how these organizations worked, see Richard H. Schein, "A Geographical and Historical Account of the American Benevolent Fraternal Order" (master's thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, 1983).