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Corridors of Value

Rural Land in Rural Life

People's intense experiences with the land have enhanced the cultural value of rural areas. Most rural landscapes are "constructed"—that is, they show a many-layered history of human intervention. Cultural conservation holds an important place in rural policy because it reinforces the sensory experience of the rural landscape and strengthens landscape's role as a symbol of stability.

Rural regions have always been about land. American cultural history suggests that the endearing values of rural regions derive from intense experiences with the physical and spatial properties of landscapes. Taken together, the land forms, topography, drainage, and plants constitute a powerful memory of place.

Settlement patterns and historic land use also reveal investments in landscapes through extensive engineering, for settlement or production, or through adaptation to given land forms. People in rural regions also psychologically invest in land, deriving values from their experience and expressing values in a number of ways—for example, in the manner in which they occupy their holdings and in the material artifacts they create, such as structures, objects, literature, art, and music. Much of the basis for cultural expression has been the perpetuation of myths about nature and land. Rural Americans have certain expectations about life and the meaning of landscape.

From the perspective of the profession of landscape architecture, much of what is of value about rural life lies within the land. Even the origins of the field suggest it. For example, at Cornell University, the landscape architecture program began in 1904 as a curriculum in "rural art": the laying of principles of art and ornamental horticulture on the land. Today, designers learn to interpret the land and to understand its experiential qualities as key elements in making interventions on behalf of rural dwellers. This orientation guides my observations in this article, which is a brief theoretical overview of the value of rural land and suggestions as to how rural landscapes may be addressed to sustain rural living.

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Constructed Landscapes

Land and its appreciation continue to be a source of stability in rural settings. Today, few American landscapes have escaped some degree of human intervention. Most have had so many modifications that the perception of them has more cultural meaning than any other kind. The landscape can be thought of as mostly a constructed phenomenon; that is, any landscape is a repository of human perception and activity—layered over time—the result of successive adaptations and accommodations derived from settlements, the patterns of fields, crops and roads, the presence of industry through harvesting or extracting and converting materials into products, the emergence of recreation sites, and so forth. These kinds of activities are the basis for sensory responses—sights, smells, sounds, even kinesthetic responses to topography. Over time, the inventory of sensory engagements expands and shrinks at any given site, depending on how evident they are to users.

Deeply constructed landscapes are pervasive, from the Atlantic coastal plains to the Pacific mountain systems. What people have embedded in the landscape over time

is revealed in the great variety of structures or fragments of structures they leave behind, for example, farmsteads, milling works, cemeteries, villages, and towns. These have been recognized as expressing endearing values, and they are the basis for interpretation in historic archeology, historic preservation, and rural history. While rural artifacts have a certain symbolic power because of their materiality, any landscape is a richer resource than what is visible. There are also invisible aspects of shared, traditional, expressive culture—the unseen mechanisms of beliefs and stories. This multisided condition—what's underground, on the surface and, perhaps, in the air—permits diverse interpretations of landscapes.

It is possible to write a deep history of almost any square mile of the American landscape based on the accumulations of natural and cultural developments on the site. In upstate, western New York, among the Finger Lakes, such a history begins with geology, with the history of mountain building, the spread of vast seas, and the effects of glaciation, because these environmental developments were responsible for the shape of the land—the constant decrease in altitude from the Pennsylvania plateau to the Great Lakes, the sedimentary layers of sand, shale, and limestone, the great gorges and lakes created by glacial runoff, and the ranges of drumlins and wetlands. The climate explains the late forestation that saturated the landmass and created the venue for prehistoric and historic life. Hunting, gathering, and agriculture shaped the cultural lives of native people, a mode of existence adapted by colonizers until they turned to cash crop farming. Where the Iroquois had peach trees, the 19th-century farmer planted a series of row crops.

In a general sense, within any square mile of the Finger Lakes, there are archeological sites pertaining to both Indian and settler life. On the surface, most of the relics relate to farming—timber framed barns; foundations for cabins and houses; small family cemeteries; and spatial groupings of farm buildings and fields. There is evidence of former wetlands, drained to increase production, and reminders of ecological succession in the array of plants that have invaded sites. A large barn once used for hay storage, when the region lead the State in hay production, is used for general storage now, because the current crop is corn or grapes. And there are other contemporary changes, perhaps an altered topography, a road where one never existed and a trailer house with no outbuildings, or a Mennonite family that eschews contemporary technology. The watershed is still intact, though diminished in size, and the trees and shrubs that line the banks of streams form a corridor for wildlife, especially birds and fur-bearing animals. The vistas across the fields are more open than they were 100 years ago, and the wind blows more freely than it did in that time. The rocky soils are the same color they have been for a long time, but they smell less organic. The distances between farms has gotten greater and the average size of each farm has increased. Utility poles line the road and connect the farms. No one remembers the family whose ancestors are buried in the small lot by a ravine. The surnames are Dutch and the head stones are local limestone.

So it is with this part of New York. The details of natural and cultural development would vary—the orientation to water, to a road, to the sun. The extent of plant succession would vary, too, including reforestation, which is occurring in much of the Northeast. Each square mile has an array of accumulations, profiles of diverse human and nonhuman nature and culture. The presence of these phenomena in everyday reality and in the memory of them constitute the image of a place.

Sustaining Landscapes

Because of their history, landscapes and rural regions are an excellent resource for cultural conservation; this is one of their fundamental values to society at-large. In conserving rural culture, we recognize the historical relationship between land and the quality of life. When cultural conservation is part of rural policy, we can extend it to a number of aspects of rural life, including the planning and design of rural regions. This entails managing a region's sense of environmental awareness, based on the physical properties of the landscape and the culture it has spawned, and heightening the legibility of the rural landscape.

Legibility is simply the image of an environment, what it looks like, what it appears to be, and how it is perceived by local people and visitors. The image of a place is the thing most people are aware of on a daily basis. It derives from conscious and unconscious perception through the bodily senses, and it becomes embedded in human memory through experience and interaction. Legibility comes and goes with time. For example, when a farm is abandoned, the natural system takes back the land; when a quarry opens and closes, either condition alters the legibility of the site. The overall effect of these actions is the cultivation of an environmental awareness. Keeping rural images coherent, recognizable on a number of levels, helps to re-enact their cultural history, and that helps stabilize everyday life. Thus, the value of rural land and rural life comes down to people being able to know something about what happened in a particular place.

Stabilization is a basis for sustainability. In this article, sustainability has to do with the recognition of the notions of balance and limits applied to local conditions. Rural regions were historically valued because they gave the impression that they had a kind of cultural sustainability. They looked like the life being lived there could go on for

a long time. Such images perpetuated the illusion of sustainable landscapes; natural systems could endure any kind of disturbance, and natural resources could support any kind of society. In our time, the realities of large-scale disturbance, large-scale production, and biochemical imbalance, for example, remind us that we must construct conditions of sustainability as part of the cultural construction of the landscape. Rural regions cannot be sustained unless we learn that this kind of transformation requires extending resources, inventorying and building on native environmental assets, adopting a conservation ethic, and developing the political will to generate local solutions to national and global problems. The extent to which we can accomplish this on a variety of scales, from small intimate sites to a large region, contributes to the overall legibility of an area. Environmental and cultural balance in a landscape is recognizable and readable, although it may be subtle, because it relies on the constant internal transfer of natural and human energy and on our ability to read the presence of history in the landscape.

Landscape Corridors and Interventions

The physiographic vehicle through which we link physical environments to cultural conservation is the landscape corridor, the building block of the rural landscape. A corridor is a landform that stretches across prairies, hills, valleys and rifts and sustains both wildness and settlement. The assets of such a corridor are water systems, including watershed and wetlands, steep topography, and diverse plant and wildlife. Most corridors of this kind are associated with streams and drainage. Native Americans and early White settlers depended on the corridors for shelter and food. Much historical settlement began with movement up river systems, with later arrivals branching out into an entire watershed. For settlers, landscape corridors were once the frontier or the boundaries for the built environment, the physical setting from which communities could derive a sense of place and scene. Corridors encouraged the recognition of time in the landscape as they bore witness to the overlaying of successive generations of settlement. For example, transportation systems were built over or parallel to one another, so that in many rural regions, settled from 1800 to 1900, the trail, the road, and the rail line accompanied the river—often the spine of the system—through the corridor.

The typical corridor has a natural structure with which people come to associate cultural values. For example, water elements include streams, rivers, wetlands, watersheds and cultural expressions related to water like swimming and boating, dams, millponds and bridges. Similarly, topographic aspects include steep slopes, caves, and rock outcroppings, connected to trails and shelters. Vegetative resources, such as timber stands, wild flowers, orchards, meadows, associate with State and county parks, fire towers, rights-of-way, hiking, and picnicking. There are historic artifacts that are archeological or architectural, perhaps constructed with corridor materials. There is wildlife in a corridor: waterfowl, birds, hunting and trapping, and observing activities. Lastly, there are places with which we associate special sensory experiences and perceptual qualities, sites where natural systems and cultural expectations interact to engender aesthetic experience. We think of these as being beautiful, and they often prescribe a view—through a woods or across a valley.

The significance of all these assets is their coalescence into zones of diversity. The richer the context, the better the prospect for memory and the more vivid the image of the place. Rural landscapes can have a kind of feedback mechanism; the more diverse the landscape, the more it stimulates responses to it, and the more it becomes part of memory and the more we "look" for it, we imagine it as diverse and rich. Landscapes gain in meaning from being remembered. Diverse landscape corridors have the natural and cultural material with which we may also associate myth; they are the physical settings for narrative and ritual. In many sections of America, landscape corridors have been, or continue to be, venues for sacred sites—chapels in the woods or burial sites.

Understanding the heightened sense of the physical and mythical properties of a landscape corridor does not fully explain the value of rural land, nor does managing such land necessarily lead to the stabilization of rural regions. Settled land implies the presence of people and of social organizations. Therefore, communities need to be part of any strategy that seeks to sustain rural values. Communities need to be inventoried along with natural and cultural features, and linkages need to be established among the assets. Inventories do several things: (1) profile the personalities of the landscape and the community; (2) ascertain their physical qualities; (3) map the infrastructure and social organizations; and (4) describe the demographics. From the inventory data, one can begin to evaluate the impact of the environment on local life, to look for the mutual interdependence of resources, and to imagine how the personalities of the environment relate to the local culture. This kind of analysis can lead to understanding the relationship between nature and culture. The very act of establishing an inventory of interdependent resources—what things are actually recognizable in the environment and how they are connected to each other—goes a long way toward demonstrating the value of rural environments.

Ideally, any rural landscape is a living system that embraces change. Before settlement, most rural sites have been presumed to be wildlands with a number of interchangeable components, with flexible structures and a high degree of variability. Human occupance and production (of anything) often overwhelm the flexibility and variability. Today, rural

regions struggle to establish a sense of environmental order based on diversity so that no one process, commodity, or socioeconomic factor dominates. In the ideal region, villages and towns are part of the system; they have compact forms to promote communication, and landscape corridors are "called in" to the community and distributed along the edges and through the settlement in the form of parks, street trees, and gardens. This kind of integration breaks down the monocultural properties of many landscapes.

The model rural region that celebrates the values of rural land requires physical intervention (reforestation, soil and watershed conservation) and managing the sensory quality of the environment. The senses are key because the higher the sensory experience the richer the experiential quality. Patterns of sensation constitute the quality of places, and that quality affects our immediate well-being, our actions, our feelings, and our understanding. Part of the symbolic value of rural land derives from the collective memory of sensations about land. Since fewer people directly experience rural land on a daily basis, those experiences are mostly imagined by the majority of the population; that is, they are cultural constructions, cultural expectations, rather than realities. Rural life and rural land, therefore, remain at some distance from many people.

Planners and designers can perpetuate a rurality based on the significance of land by managing the sense of a region, by analyzing it to see if it seems accessible to its people, and by assessing character to be preserved or developed. Large elements in the landscape—the main centers, routes, districts, natural features—can be made more evident. The liveliness of a place is influenced by the transparency of the setting (how it makes visible its activity). For people to continue to believe in land, they need to leave perceptible traces of their presence on it, and the landscape ought to express their actions. This approach, this engagement with the landscape, also creates the opportunity for some local control of the places in which people live.

Finally, the value of rural areas is their prospect for symbolizing social and natural stability. Such images can be managed by residents and their agencies. The value of land and the rural life with which it is associated comes down to historical values, recognizable images, landscapes that facilitate communication, and to the intuitive feeling that local life is connected to the web of living things. Moreover, diversity in the sensory quality of the environment improves the quality of life for everyone. The cultural history of rural regions suggests that land can be the basis of a good quality of life for large segments of the population, and the resonance of that life has been evident in people's beliefs and cultural artifacts. To facilitate social stability, we may be at a time when the reinvention of the rural endowment should start with the land.

For Additional Reading . . .

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