How to Study the Landscape
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There is a school of cultural geographers which believes that the dwelling is not only the most important element in the landscape, but is the key to understanding all other elements in the landscape: the social order, the economy, the natural resources, the history, and culture. It so happens that the dwelling which these geographers usually have in mind is the European farmhouse or farmstead a combination under one roof of residence, and storage, and work areas. In use and in design and in materials, this farmhouse is closely attuned to the surrounding land, and is, in fact, a product of it. Few American farmhouses, however, resemble the farmhouses of the Old World. Most of them are designed and used as residences, pure and simple, and are essentially like the dwellings in the nearby town, inhabited by lawyers, and merchants, and clergymen. Indeed, our farmhouses are often copies of these urban counterparts. We ought to be cautious, then, in accepting some of the European theories about the relationship between dwelling and landscape. A house in Juneau, Alaska, is much more to resemble a house in Shreveport, Louisiana, than an Eskimo dwelling a few hundred miles away. Perhaps we deplore this circumstance, but it is essential that we learn to live with it; and I can think of no better way for landscape studies to achieve academic respectability than for it to formulate a new and American way of defining house types based not on the 19th Century concern for regionalism, use of local materials, local craftsmanship, and local agriculture, but on thoroughly contemporary notions: the dwelling defined in terms of its
longevity, of its relationship to work, to the family, to the community, and of its psychological relationship to the natural environment.

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So there comes a day, usually around mid-term, when the students are informed that we are about to embark on the study of a landscape of a very different kind: the landscape which began to emerge around the middle of the 19th Century and which is now approaching full flower. It is popular to say that we are in a period of transition -and it has been said, with some justification, for the past hundred years. But the phrase represents a kind of evasion, an unwillingness to recognize that in many areas of our culture the final form can be discerned. The notion of a kind of perpetual transition has the effect of making us appraise many things in terms of a familiar past instead of in terms of present-day realities. The widespread belief that ours is a transitional landscape is a case in point: we tend to see it not as it is, with its own unique character, but as a degenerate version of the traditional landscape, and to see its history as a long, drawn-out backsliding, the abandonment of old values, old techniques, old institutions, with nothing developing to take their place.

But a more sensible approach, it seems to me, is to try to discover when some of its characteristics first made their appearance, rather than to dwell on the disappearance of the old. The gradual obsolescence of the traditional purpose barn is not so important as the rise of a kind of farming where no barn is needed, and all produce is trucked to a local processing plant.

The discussion of the contemporary American landscape should start with the transformation of a basic landscape element: the piece of land or the farm. In the
traditional order of things, at least in the United States, the ideal was that the family who owned the land also lived on it and worked it; family status came from the relationship, and in fact many colonial statutes and even the Homestead Act of 1862 stipulated that a dwelling must be built on the piece of land. But with the sudden availability after independence of immense amounts of federal land for settlement, this concept was gradually abandoned. In the new territories in the West, land was acquired for speculation and its distant owner neither lived on it nor worked it. Other pieces of federal land were often occupied by squatters who neither bought it or worked it, and still other land was exploited for its timber or its grazing by persons who neither lived on it nor bothered to buy it. This is how a writer on land use in America sums up the situation. After 1812, he says, "We meet for the first time on a large scale one of the significant realities to which folk myth has blinded us; independence of the three variables: transfer of land from federal title, actual settlement, and economic development."¹

As a result of this change, land ceased to indicate the status of the owner or occupant or user. Environmentalists are fond of talking about the need of a bond between man and the land, a biological tie or a mystic relationship. But in the traditional landscape, that bond meant something very specific: it meant that a family was legally and economically and even historically identified with the land it owned and lived on and exploited. The bond was the basis of citizenship. Finally, the house itself symbolized the family attachment, and was, in a sense, the matrix of the landscape.

Thus, when that three-fold bond began to lose its power in the course of the 19th Century, the landscape had to change. Land was defined in a new way: as a commodity be bought and sold and used in a variety of money-making ways, and the house was redefined in much simpler terms: as a place of residence, to be designed and located as such. Home and place of work were no longer necessarily identical and were even sometimes far apart. Land was put to new and unpredictable uses, or left untouched for future speculation. The fabric of the traditional landscape became loose and threatened to fall apart.

It is when we try to follow this development that we discover the importance of a landscape element which we had previously paid little attention to, and that is the road or highway. It had always been there, of course, but it had been so modest, so limited in its influence that we had taken it for granted. For centuries the country road had been merely a path, a cleared space created by 'Some local ordinance to enable people to come to town to pay taxes, go to church, go to market -a political device, as it were, never given any but the most perfunctory care. But shortly after the Revolution, the building of roads became a matter of national concern, and from then on it began to play a role in the landscape, until (as we all know) it is now the most powerful force for the destruction or creation of landscapes that we have.

There is an enormous amount of writing on roads and railways, and some of it not all of it by any means -makes interesting reading. But naturally enough most of it deals with the engineering aspect, or with the traffic which highway handles, and it is full of superlatives and statistics. When I first decided to discuss the road, I was sure that it could be disposed of in two lectures, illustrated with appropriate slides contrasting old,
narrow, rutted roads with the Interstate. But I soon found out that from the point of view of the course, the really significant thing about the road was how it affected the landscape; how it started out as a wavering line between fields and houses and hills and then took over more and more land, influenced and changed a wider and wider environment until the map of the United States seemed nothing but a web of roads and railroads and highways.

And to further complicate matters, I began to see how the road altered not only the way people travelled, but how they perceived the world. The first turnpikes, in the early years of the 19th Century, gave the youth of America its first taste of speed: sulky racing got its start on the turnpikes of New York State, and other turnpikes, by travelling straight across country and bypassing the small villages, revealed the wilderness aspect of the American landscape. The cult of new models and accessories and driving techniques got its start when travelers learned to admire the handsomely painted stage coaches and the shiny harness and the bells on the horses, and when stage coach drivers competed in style and elegance.

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When the railroad came into a town it destroyed the uniformity of the grid system. Railroad Avenue, with its skid row and its hotels, and with its railside factories and warehouses, introduced an axial development and distorted the original spatial order. The streetcar had much the same effect: it extended the range of commuters and gave them a wider choice of places to live, it decentralized many small businesses, and at transfer points it fostered a cluster of stores and services. And the street itself began to assume a new role: the practice of placing utilities under the street pavement - water, gas, sewerage,
light, and eventually telephone lines - gave the street a permanence which it had never previously had, so that it became more important than the property on both sides of it. As in almost every other part of the landscape, the road or street or highway became the armature, the framework of the landscape. The piece of land no longer determined its composition.

What I am saying is an old story. We know, because we see evidence of it every day, that the street or highway is like a magnet that attracts houses, factories, places of business and entertainment to its margins. We are all aware that the important streets and arteries no longer exist to serve the local population, but that they create their own community, their own architecture, their own kind of business, their own rhythm and their own mobile population. I have found, somewhat to my embarrassment, that students are, generally speaking, far better informed about the highway and its culture than I am, and if there is any risk in discussing the topic, it is the risk of too much enthusiasm, too great a readiness to describe the drive-in, the truck stop, the advertising, and the psychology of the mobile consumer as forms of pop culture, as topics important and attractive in themselves.

That is one reason why I think the emphasis should be put not so much on the road or highway, as on the broader landscape created or influenced by the highway. For the highway is merely a symbol of how we have learned to organize space and movement; and our zeal to reduce every action, every undertaking to a process of steady, uninterrupted flow of energy and productivity is actually better illustrated in the organization of a factory, a farm, even a university than it is in the incessant activity of the highway. It is in that broader landscape that we can study how the dwelling partakes
of the spirit of the highway, and the history of the dwelling over the last one hundred and fifty years demonstrates the slow emergence of new ideas of community and of mobility. The balloon frame was not the outcome of a gradual evolution of folk building techniques; it was invented by harassed carpenters in boomtown Chicago. It rejected tradition and group collaboration in favor of speed and impermanence. The prefabricated or ready cut house, developed in the mid-century, was popularized by the expansion of railroad lines into the treeless High Plains, and made rapid settlement possible. The latest innovation was a response to the need of the motorist for a mobile home. The time has not yet come when we can define the contemporary American home with any finality in this instance we are indeed in a period of intellectual transition, still thinking of the traditional European dwelling. But the geographers' point is still valid: the house is in many ways a microcosm of the landscape; the landscape explains the house.