Concluding with Landscapes
Often a disconcerting thought has come to me and given me pause. It is this: Whatever I may have fondly supposed, all that I have been writing and saying over the past years has in the last analysis dealt with a single topic—how to define (or redefine) the concept landscape. The concept, not landscape as phenomena, as environments, these I have been able to handle without much difficulty. What everyone likes to hear is that the landscape where they live is unique of its kind, worthy of the closest study, and so one has only to emphasize its unique characteristics to give full satisfaction. Yet an unforeseen complication has arisen. The greater the number of landscapes I explored, the more it seemed that they all had traits in common and that the essence of each was not its uniqueness but its similarity to others. It occurred to me that there might be such a thing as a prototypal landscape, or more precisely landscape as a primordial idea, of which all these visible landscapes were merely so many imperfect manifestations. It then became a question of defining that idea or concept, after which the defining of the individual landscape would be plain sailing.

I cannot say that many others in the field of environmental studies have shared this perplexity of mine—a perplexity which any medieval monk could have disposed of in short order. I have been given to understand that the problem had been more than adequately handled by geographers and anthropologists, and that it would be far better if I were concerned with the landscape itself—particularly the contemporary American landscape, much in need of criticism and reform. That may well have been good advice. Yet when we use a word carelessly (as we now use the word landscape) we are likely to get into trouble, and it is always prudent to know what we are talking about.

I have mentioned more than once how unsatisfactory we all find the current dictionary definition of the word: “A view or vista of scenery on the land, or a painting depicting such a scene.” The formula dates back more than three hundred years. But since then we have learned to see a landscape as something more than beautiful scenery. We have learned that it can be designed and created from scratch, that it can grow old and fall into decay. We have ceased to think of it as remote from our daily lives, and indeed we now believe that to be part of a landscape, to derive our identity from it is an essential precondition of our being in the world, in the most solemn meaning of the phrase. It is this greatly expanded significance of landscape that makes a new definition so necessary now.

In time we will doubtless formulate one. What we have recently come up with, in default of help from the dictionary, is something admittedly makeshift and incomplete. By rejecting the strictly esthetic or phenomenological approach—landscape as an isolated phenomenon stripped of origins and functions, unrelated to existence—we are able to discuss it in mundane terms, and it is not uncommon to hear a landscape referred to as the expression in terms of space of a given social order, a kind of two-dimensional language.
with its own grammar and its own logic. The simile may lack precision; just the same, those who use it find it full of useful suggestions. Like a language, a landscape will have obscure and undecipherable origins, like a language it is the slow creation of all elements in society. It grows according to its own laws, rejecting or accepting neologisms as it sees fit, clinging to obsolescent forms, inventing new ones. A landscape, like a language, is the field of perpetual conflict and compromise between what is established by authority and what the vernacular insists upon preferring. Like the grammarians or the lexicographers, the planner, the reformer has to take a stand, and it is usually on the side of what is rational and correct, on the side of the intellectual establishment. That is as it should be. We are familiar enough with the tyranny a too highly structured language or a landscape too carefully planned can exert, but there is something to be said for rules, however arbitrary. Just as a language without established standards of elegance and clarity and respect for tradition can thwart the best of minds, a landscape left to itself without long-range goals, without structure, without law, though it may call itself a paradise, ends by frustrating any search for social or moral order.

The comparison can be carried just so far, but in the case of both language and landscape, growth and preservation and beauty is finally, I think, a matter of history and how we deal with it. Whatever definition of landscape we finally reach, to be serviceable it will have to take into account the ceaseless interaction between the ephemeral, the mobile, the vernacular on the one hand, and the authority of legally established, premeditated permanent forms on the other.

It may be that I am here on the track of that elusive landscape concept: the ideal landscape defined not as a static utopia dedicated to ecological or social or religious principles, but as an environment where permanence and change have struck a balance. Few landscapes have achieved this and fewer still have managed to maintain it for any length of time. But all of them, it seems to me, have sought it, all of them in one manner or another, that is to say, have acknowledged the existence of landscape as an idea. The world being what it is, it is far easier to find examples of imbalance than of landscape balance. The two examples of the former I offer are worth studying not merely for their cautionary value—for one shows the perils of mobility, the other the perils which come with too great a regard for position in the landscape—but also because they are both related, though indirectly, to our own American landscape and its future.

I have elsewhere explained the original meaning of the word landscape, so it is enough to say that it meant a collection, a "sheet" of lands, presumably interrelated and part of a system. A land was a defined piece of ground, and we can assume that in the medieval world it was most often used to indicate a patch of plowed or cultivated ground, that being the most valuable kind. Landscape therefore must have been a word much used by villagers and peasants and farmhands; it described their own small world. But how much was it used by other elements in society? It rarely occurs in legal documents of the period. The Domesday Book, a remarkable inventory of land holdings compiled by order of William the Conqueror in the eleventh century, was, to be sure, written in Latin, but no translation ever mentioned landscape, and indeed the word itself seems to have fallen into disuse. Two centuries after the conquest a new term, imported from France, though of Latin origin, took its place. Country or countryside came to indicate a much more extensive, though less precisely defined area: the territory of a community of people all speaking the same dialect, all engaged in the same kind of farming, all subjects of the same local lord, all conscious of having customs and traditions of their own and of possessing certain ancient rights and privileges. It was not until modern times that the word country came to indicate nation.

It is here, in the usage of the two words landscape and country, that we are confronted with the distinction between the vernacular and the aristocratic or political concepts of space. In the view of the noblemen and clergy, of the larger landowners, landscape was merely a vernacular or peasant term describing a cluster of small, temporary, crudely measured spaces which frequently changed hands and even changed in shape and size. It was, in fact, a fragment of a large feudal estate, a right or series of rights granted to its occupants but ultimately the property of the lord or of the crown. It was a term current only in small villages. The aristocratic concept of space was entirely different. The estate of a nobleman or of a bishop, the barony or domain of the knight, the forest of the king, not to mention his kingdom, all had a definite, almost sacred origin, their boundaries vouch for by treaty or charter. Those who held them not only had the right to administer justice, but to bequeath them to their descendants. Aristocratic space, in the medieval world, was thus permanent and relatively autonomous. It was the creation of political or legal decisions.

Although the two kinds of space were intermingled, the difference between the two ways of seeing the world and of organizing space was profound, and insofar as we are exploring the early usage of the word landscape it is the vernacular landscape which concerns us. The current tendency to associate the word vernacular with a local form of speech and a local form of art and decoration entitles us to use the word to describe other aspects of local culture. The word derives from the Latin vernum, meaning a slave born in the house of his or her master, and by extension in Classical times it meant a native, one whose existence was confined to a village or estate and who was devoted to routine work. A vernacular culture would imply a way of life ruled by tradition and custom, entirely remote from the larger world of politics and law; a way of life where identity derived not from permanent possession of land but from membership in a group or super-family.

It follows, I think, that there can be such a thing as a vernacular landscape:
one where evidences of a political organization of space are largely or entirely absent. I have already mentioned several features of the political landscape: the visibility and sanctity of boundaries, the importance of monuments and of centrefugal highways, the close relationship between status and enclosed space. By political I mean those spaces and structures designed to impose or preserve a unity and order on the land, or in keeping with a long-range, large-scale plan. Under that heading we should include such modern features as the interstate highway, the hydroelectric dam, the airport and power transmission lines, whether we happen to care for them or not.

A vernacular landscape reveals a distinct way of defining and handling time and space. In the United States there is a series of vernacular landscapes of a particularly pure type in the Pueblo Indian communities of the Southwest, and whenever we see one we are likely to find it confusing and all but impossible to interpret in our conventional European-American terms. The medieval landscape is scarcely easier to understand, even though in the course of centuries it gradually acquired several political components: castles, manors, king's highways, and chartered cities. These are what enable us to see its evolution. Yet underneath those symbols of permanent political power there lay a vernacular landscape—or rather thousands of small and impoverished vernacular landscapes, organizing and using spaces in their traditional way and living in communities governed by custom, held together by personal relationships. We learn something about them by investigating the topographical and technological and social factors which determined their economy and their way of life, but in the long run I suspect no landscape, vernacular or otherwise, can be comprehended unless we perceive it as an organization of space, unless we ask ourselves who owns or uses the spaces, how they were created and how they change. Often it is the legal aspects of the landscape that give us the clearest insight, especially into the relationship between the peasant or villager and the piece of land he works.

"It is very rare, during the whole of the feudal era," Marc Bloch remarks,

for anyone to speak of ownership, either of an estate or an office. . . . [I]n the word ownership as applied to landed property there had been almost meaningless . . . for nearly all land and a great many human beings were burdened at this time with a multiplicity of obligations differing in their nature, but all apparently of equal merit. None implied the fixed proprietary exclusiveness which belonged to the concept of ownership in Roman law. The tenant who—from father to son, as a rule—ploughs the land and gathers in the crop, his immediate lord to whom he pays dues and who, in certain circumstances, can resume possession of the land; the lord of the lord, and so on, right up the feudal ladder—how many persons there are who can say, each with as much justification as the other "that is my field."*

Spaces in this vernacular landscape thus indicate personal relationships, and they indicate in no less complicated manner the involved and often

conflicting traditions of the community: who controls the vast number of "waste spaces"—some as extensive as a whole moor or marsh, others no larger than the margin of a road or a lane. Is the road itself a waste? Given a new use, a space changes its name; a "land" grown to grass becomes a "ley"; waste, preempted by the crown, becomes a royal forest with its own set of laws. Maitland, the legal historian, endeavoring to make legal sense of the landscape of medieval Cambridge, reminds us of its hopeless complexity and bids us "think of the grantor [King John] and his royal rights, of the grantees and their complex interests, of the strips in the fields and the odds and ends of sward, of the green commons of the town, of the house covered nucleus . . . of the patchwork of fields, the network of rents"—and from this confusion we are somehow to deduce a coherent spatial pattern.

At the present stage of our studies of the vernacular landscape as a type all that we can say is that its spaces are usually small, irregular in shape, subject to rapid change in use, in ownership, in dimensions; that the houses, even the villages themselves, grow, shrink, change morphology, change location; that there is always a vast amount of "common land"—waste, pasture, forest, areas where natural resources are exploited in a piecemeal manner; that its roads are little more than paths and lanes, never maintained and rarely permanent; finally that the vernacular landscape is a scattering of hamlets and clusters of fields, islands in a sea of waste or wilderness changing from generation to generation, leaving no monuments, only abandonment or signs of renewal.

Mobility and change are the key to the vernacular landscape, but of an involuntary, reluctant sort; not the expression of restlessness and search for improvement but an unending patient adjustment to circumstances. Far too often these are the arbitrary decisions of those in power, but natural conditions play their part and so do ignorance and a blind loyalty to local ways, and so does the absence of long-range objectives: the absence of what we would call a sense of future history. A vernacular landscape, both in the Southwest and in medieval Europe, is an impressive display of devotion to common customs and of an inexhaustible ingenuity in finding short-term solutions.

At the same time we cannot overlook what to us is the cultural poverty of such a landscape, its lack of any purposeful continuity. It thinks not of history but of legends and myths. Well into the Renaissance and even later, the inhabitants of vernacular landscapes in Europe still half-believed in heathen divinities, adorned their houses with heathen symbols, and observed heathen rites and holidays. Even historical figures, like Charlemagne or Barbarossa, historical events like the Crusades or the actual settlement of a town or city, were transformed into fairy tales. They lived in a landscape of ancient villages, ruined castles, churches built on the site of temples, yet the only monuments they recognized were miraculous springs, magic rocks, and trees, the only event they understood was the sound of Odin with his pack of hounds.
rushing through the forest by night. A landscape without visible signs of political history is a landscape without memory or forethought. We are inclined in America to think that the value of monuments is simply to remind us of origins. They are much more valuable as reminders of long-range, collective purpose, of goals and objectives and principles. As such even the least sightly of monuments gives a landscape beauty and dignity and keeps the collective memory alive.

Let us call that early medieval landscape Landscape One. There is another landscape (which we may call Landscape Two), which began to take shape in the latter part of the fifteenth century and which we can associate with the Renaissance, and since we are giving them names, let us identify a Landscape Three, which we can see in certain aspects of contemporary America.

I am tempted to think that Landscape Three is already beginning to show some of the characteristics of Landscape One, but before I offer evidence let me say something about Landscape Two, which was in many ways the reverse of Landscape One. We are in fact very familiar with Landscape Two. Artists and architects and landscape designers spend much time studying it, and they copy it in their professional work, and all of us who write about it travel to Europe to see it firsthand. So I merely mention the ways in which it differs from Landscape One. Its spaces, rural and urban, are clearly and permanently defined and made visible by walls and hedges or zones of open greenery or lawn. They are designed to be self-contained and shapely and beautiful. Landscape Two sets great store on visibility; that is why we have that seventeenth-century definition of landscape as "a vista or view of scenery of the land"—landscape as a work of art, as a kind of supergarden. Unlike Landscape One, which mixed all kinds of uses and spaces together, Landscape Two insists on spaces which are homogeneous and devoted to a single purpose: It makes a distinction between city and country, between forest and field, between public and private, rich and poor, work and play; it prefers the linear frontier between nations rather than the medieval patchwork of intermingled territories. As for the distinction between mobility and immobility, it clearly believes that whatever is temporary or short-lived or movable is not to be encouraged.

But the essential characteristic of Landscape Two is its belief in the sanctity of place. It is place, permanent position both in the social and topographical sense, that gives us identity. The function of space according to this belief is to make us visible, allow us to put down roots and become members of society. Land in Landscape One was a member of a working community, it was a temporary symbol of relationships. In Landscape Two land means property and permanence and power.

Landscape Two started to evolve in a time in European history when the old customary farm community with its disposable parcels of land and its confusion of rights and obligations was being abandoned in favor of the individual ownership and operation of farms: private holdings composed of single-purpose permanent fields with the homestead of the owner in the center of the property. This was a time when men were discovering the natural environment and its many variations in climate and soil and topography, and when the challenge to agriculture was to define all varieties of land and put them to their appropriate use. It was in consequence a time when the forest was discovered as a distinct environment, with distinct economic and ecological characteristics, an environment worth preserving and improving.

There is little new to be said about the beauty and order of Landscape Two. It remains to this day the most successful landscape, esthetically speaking, that there has ever been in the Western world, one which we will always try to imitate when we want to produce landscapes for delight and inspiration. Americans have a special reason for admiring it, for it is here in the United States that we see the largest and most impressive example of neoclassic spatial organization. Our national grid system, devised by the Founding Fathers, represents the last attempt to produce a Classical political landscape, one based on the notion that certain spaces—notably the square and the rectangle—were inherently beautiful and therefore suited to the creation of a just society. It is, to be sure, a landscape with few dramatic beauties and much monotony, but it is a landscape which conforms to Winckelmann's definition of Classical perfection: one of noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.

What we enjoy about the early-nineteenth-century American landscape is the ease with which it can be read and interpreted. The farm stands in the midst of its fields and clearly reveals its degree of prosperity and contentment. Each church has a white steeple, each public square has a monument, each field its fence, each straight road its destination. It is a landscape of rectangular fields, green woodlands, white houses, and red brick towns. It is like a luminous painting: vivid, carefully composed, appealing to the emotions, and reassuringly stable.

Yet it did not last for long; scarcely a half century, and a number of reasons can be given for its rapid decay: the coming of the railroad, the opening up of newer land further West, the invention of the balloon frame and of horse-drawn farm equipment, the growth of manufacturing in the East, the influx of settlers from Europe—all these developments affected the spatial organization of Landscape Two in America and in a few decades made it obsolete. Yet I cannot help feeling that even from the start Landscape Two was not entirely suited to us. It never produced those politically active farm communities that Jefferson and his colleagues dreamed of, never really persuaded us to put down roots and stay put in one place. Instead of being a blueprint for the ideal, Classical, democratic social order, the grid system became simply an easy and effective way of dividing up the land and of encouraging the settlement of the Midwest. The question which we will eventually have to confront is whether
Landscape Two ever belonged in the English-speaking New World. (I say English-speaking advisedly, because it did take hold in Latin America.)

The settlement of Anglo-Americans can best be understood as a belated episode in the history of Landscape One: a last titanic wave of mobility, of immigrants leaving the vanishing vernacular landscape of rural England. Once settled here, the predominantly young, blue-collar population produced a colonial version of Landscape One—but lacking in one important traditional feature: the farm village. New England tried to produce it, the authorities in London tried to produce it in Virginia, but new ways of farming, new kinds of land ownership, and a new kind of freedom frustrated every attempt, and by the time of the Revolution even in New England the farm village was out of date. What survived of that early colonial vernacular culture was its mobility, its adaptability, its preference for the transitory, the ephemeral: the short-lived log cabins, the brief exploitation of the environment, the ad hoc community of the frontier and the trading post, even while the grid of Landscape Two stood waiting for Jefferson’s Classical farm villages to appear.

It would be wrong to imply that modern America is entirely the product of that vernacular culture, or that we do not possess a vast and rich landscape, urban as well as rural, dedicated to stability and history and established landscape values. My concern is that these two landscapes do not always recognize what each has to offer to the other and that Landscape Three may fail to achieve a balance between them. I do not believe that the Establishment—political, intellectual, artistic—is aware of the vitality and extent of that vernacular element, and I do not believe that we recognize the danger of having two distinct sublandscapes, one dedicated to stability and place, the other dedicated to mobility. Such was the case in Landscape One. Our vernacular landscape has unparalleled vitality and diversity, but it resembles Landscape One in its detachment from formal space, its indifference to history, and its essentially utilitarian, conscienceless use of the environment. We cannot say that we are returning to the Dark Ages, but the similarity between Landscape Three and Landscape One is based on an important circumstance: both lack the humanist tradition of the Renaissance. Both are ignorant of Landscape Two and what it stood for.

As I travel about the country, I am often bewildered by the proliferation of spaces and the uses of spaces that had no counterpart in the traditional landscape: parking lots, landing fields, shopping centers, trailer courts, high-rise condominiums, wildlife shelters, Disneyland. I am bewildered by our usual use of space: churches used as discotheques, dwellings used as churches, downtown streets used for jogging, empty lots in crowded cities, industrial plants in the open country, cemeteries used for archery practice, Easter sunrise services in a football stadium. I am confused by the temporary spaces I see: the drive-in, fast-food establishments that are torn down after a year, the fields planted to corn and then to soy beans and then subdivided; the trailer communities that vanish when vacation time is over, the tropical gardens in shopping malls that are replaced each season; motels abandoned when the highway moves. Because of my age my first reaction to these new spaces is dismay; they are not the kind of spaces I was accustomed to in the Landscape Two of my youth. But my second and (I hope) more tolerant reaction is that all this is part of our culture, that it can be treated with respect and that here is a new and challenging field of environmental design.

I would like to think that in the future the profession of landscape architecture will expand beyond its present confines (established by Landscape Two) and involve itself in making mobility orderly and beautiful. This would mean knowing a great deal about land, its uses, its values, and the political and economic and cultural forces affecting its distribution. The environmental designer should be concerned with the spatial changes taking place. It is precisely in the field of land use and community planning that a trained imagination, an awareness of environment and habit can be of the greatest value. What has been done in the way of producing new landscapes, new wilderness areas, farms and factories and cities in Holland and Israel could serve as a model. Environmental design is not simply a matter of protecting nature as it is, but of creating a new nature, a new beauty. It is finally a matter of defining landscape in a way that includes both the mobility of the vernacular and the political infrastructure of a stable social order.

In matters having to do with the natural environment we are most of us children of Landscape Two. From that parent we have learned not only to study the world around us but also to lavish care upon it and bring it to a state of lasting perfection. It was Landscape Two that taught us that the contemplation of nature can be a kind of revelation of the invisible world, and of ourselves.

But it was also Landscape Two that impressed upon us the notion that there can be only one kind of landscape: a landscape identified with a very static, very conservative social order, and that there can be only one true philosophy of nature: that of Landscape Two.

That first heritage of love and wonder is still with us, stronger perhaps than ever. It is that other heritage, that clinging to obsolete forms and attitudes, that threatens the emergence of a truly balanced Landscape Three. We no longer live in the country, we no longer farm, we no longer derive our identity from possession of land. Like the harassed peasant of Landscape One, though to a far greater degree, we derive our identity from our relationship with other people, and when we talk about the importance of place, the necessity of belonging to a place, let us be clear that in Landscape Three place means the people in it, not simply the natural environment. For political and economic reasons Landscape Two greatly exaggerated the importance of
belonging to a community. But the agricultural community was what was meant, the tightly organized hierarchy of landowners and masters and workers. Not every applicant was admitted, and the conditions attached to membership were strict and arbitrary; final acceptance was slow in coming. In Landscape Three the reverse is the case, and the ease with which a stranger can be assimilated, the speed with which a new community can come into being are both extraordinary phenomena. It may not be entirely accurate to say (as a developer once said to me) that “people follow plumbing,” meaning that utilities are the infrastructure of any residential community. It is nevertheless true that we have abandoned the old political procedures of creating places. The forming of a new community now calls for little more than the gregarious impulse of a dozen families attracted by certain elementary public services. This is the kind of new community that we are seeing all over America: at remote construction sites, in recreation areas, in trailer courts, in the shanty towns of wetbacks and migrant workers; the emergence of what we may call vernacular communities—without political status, without plan, ruled by informal local custom, often ingenious adaptations to an unlikely site and makeshift materials, destined to last no more than a year or two, and working as well as most communities do. They would be better and last longer if they were properly designed and serviced. They could acquire dignity if the political landscape made a gesture of recognition. Yet very little is needed to give those new communities a true identity: a reminder, a symbol of permanence to indicate that they too have a history ahead of them.

One reason for paying more attention to this aspect of Landscape Three is that these settlements will in time serve as nuclei for small-scale landscapes. For that is always how landscapes have been formed, not only by topography and physical decisions, but by the indigenous organization and development of spaces to serve the needs of the focal community: gainful employment, recreation, social contacts, contacts with nature, contacts with the alien world. In one form or another, these are the ends which all landscapes serve, and that is why they are all fundamentally versions of the primal idea of landscape.

My search for a definition has led me back to that old Anglo-Saxon meaning: landscape is not scenery; it is not a political unit; it is really no more than a collection, a system of man-made spaces on the surface of the earth. Whatever its shape or size it is never simply a natural space, a feature of the natural environment; it is always artificial, always synthetic, always subject to sudden or unpredictable change. We create them and need them because every landscape is the place where we establish our own human organization of space and time. It is where the slow, natural processes of growth and maturity and decay are deliberately set aside and history is substituted. A landscape is where we speed up or retard or divert the cosmic program and impose our own. “By conquering nature,” Mircea Eliade writes, “man can become Nature’s rival without being the slave of time .... Science and industry proclaim that man can achieve things better and faster than nature if he, by means of his intelligence, succeeds in penetrating to her secrets.”

When we see how we have succeeded in imposing our own rhythm on nature in the agricultural landscape, how we have altered the life cycle of plants and animals and even transposed the seasons, we become aware of how dangerous a role we have assumed, and there are many who say that the salvation of Landscape Three depends on our relinquishing this power to alter the flow of time and on our returning to a more natural order. But the new ordering of time should affect not only nature, it should affect ourselves. It promises us a new kind of history, a new, more responsive social order, and ultimately a new landscape.
Notes

The Word Itself

A Pair of Ideal Landscapes
11. Ibid., p. 121.

**Country Towns for a New Part of the Country**

**The Movable Dwelling and How It Came to America**
6. George A. Strick, "Lumbering and Western Louisiana Cultural Landscape."

**Stone and its Substitutes**

**Craftsman Style and Technosyle**

**The Origin of Parks**

**A Vision of New Fields**