

PRESERVATION INSTITUTE: NANTUCKET

Workshop on Vernacular Landscapes, May 1966

"People, Places and Politics"

A central concern of our time is the loss of credibility in our political institutions, a diminishing faith in our ability to govern ourselves effectively and fairly. The shorthand term for this problem is the "loss of civic capacity", a lessened ability to be effective citizens as well as a lessened confidence in our ability to generate and support effective leaders. This in turn relates to the loss of community; the loss of the "old fashioned civic virtues of trust, honesty, justice, toleration, cooperation, hope and remembrance."

The impact of this on our landscapes is clear. Ineffective government and a disengaged citizenry will not result in the thoughtful integrated, sustained action necessary to conserve, protect and wisely use our resources.

Recently I participated in a workshop of the Next Generation project sponsored by the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy. Two dozen land use "experts" and practitioners from around the country concluded that we have all of the tools and techniques we need for better land use. What we lack in far too many communities are effective local leaders, with access to the information they require, and an engaged and supportive citizenry.

At the Glynwood Center, we are exploring using the tools of landscape interpretation to address this problem - to inspire people to "affect change for the better" in their communities. This paper presents an initial exploration of why we think there is an important connection between understanding and valuing "place" - or landscapes (since in my use of the term I include both cultural and natural resources) - and the will and ability to create better futures for our communities.

In Middle Tennessee, recently, I learned that the most common concern expressed to religious leaders in that region is the lack of community. This came as no surprise, since this concern is increasingly evident across the country. However, it was a surprise to learn that the congregants blame the problem on land use patterns. If so many people are making this connection - why has this constituency for better land use not been tapped? Why do we persist, in all too many towns and villages, in thinking that the loss of the rolling agricultural land of Ante-bellum town centers of Middle Tennessee - or whatever features typify your community - is pre-ordained in the American future?

It is a failure to believe that we can do things differently. In part, it reflects the lack of civic capacity. In part it is also a failure of imagination - of understanding what we could have and its value to our lives. In *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch wrote:

"...most Americans...are hardly aware of the potential value of harmonious surroundings, a world which they may have briefly glimpsed only as tourists or as escaped vacationers. They can have little sense of what a setting can mean in terms of daily delight, or as a continuous anchor for their lives, or as an extension of the meaningfulness and richness of the world."

Instead, for most of the new residents of Middle Tennessee, life's daily setting is a relatively new suburban development, which has sprouted as the final crop from those fertile hills.

Many of the problems of suburban development have become widely recognized: the reliance on the automobile, the finely calibrated economic segregation, the lack of any central public meeting places. All of these undermine the routine intercourse necessary if people are to develop the knowledge and trust required for an effective civic enterprise - to create and sustain communities.

Of course, the suburbs also reflect the high mobility rate that has become common in much of America. For example, as noted recently in *Land Use in America*, the average American will live in ten houses during his or her lifetime often in totally new communities. This has contributed to the continuation of the frontier ethic - that belief that you can do what you want and move on. If your neighbors don't like what you are doing - they can move on. There is always somewhere else where you can have a fresh start and leave your old problems - and often a fouled landscape - behind.

However, with the increased economic uncertainty that is rampant in large segments of the American population, the confidence that we can always move on is quickly dissipating. The economic merry-go-round is stopping and many people worry about their ability to remain where they are, let alone move on to someplace new and better. Therefore they are beginning to have a greater stake in the place where they live now. They are beginning to have a reason to take a longer view.

This coincides with - and supports - the growing effort to understand and apply the concept of "sustainable development." For although this concept is amorphous, it does entail an emphasis on the longer term view of which our society, with access to seemingly unlimited resources, has always felt it could afford to ignore.

But sustainable development also depends upon effective governance. As "devolution" pushes more responsibility to the state and local levels, so that greater numbers of decision-makers are involved in more significant decisions, the quality of leadership and the support of an informed citizenry become more important as well. And since land use is a key element of sustainable development, we will not conserve our landscapes and our communities without effective governance.

Ironically, just as we are developing a new appreciation of the importance of civic capacity - particularly at the local level - we are recognizing that it is weak, that over the past few decades we have allowed it to atrophy. The reasons are multiple and complex. They range from an exaggerated importance being placed on activities at the federal and state level, to our residential mobility, to the economic pressures that result in work consuming the time that once might have been devoted to the volunteer fire department or service on a local board.

How can we regain the broad-based participation that is at the heart of civic capability? What threads must be spun and then woven together to restore the rich tapestry?

Robert Putnam has studied Italy's effort to regionalize government to determine why it worked well in some regions and not others. He concluded that "most fundamental to the civic community is the social ability to collaborate for shared interest."

"On the supply side...representative government is facilitated by the social and citizens. On the demand side, citizens in civic communities expect better government and (in part through their own efforts), they get it. They demand more effective public service, and they are prepared to act collectively to achieve their shared goals. Their counterparts in less civic regions more commonly assume the role of alienated and cynical suppliants."

Unfortunately, "alienated and cynical" is probably a fair characterization of the prevalent attitudes in many American communities. Surely this frame of mind cannot foster a sense of responsibility for what goes on in the community.

So again, how do we begin to regenerate what we have lost? How do we restore the strong local

communities that are essential to the political efficacy which in turn is essential to sustainable development?

A few years ago I asked writer Barry Lopez what one thing we Americans have to learn to protect our landscapes. His reply was stunning in its simplicity: "We must learn to stay home." Or as other bioregionalists might say, we must learn to "reinhabit" our places in a new and profound way. Ah...the ties to reading the landscape begin to emerge.

The editors of Orion magazine have suggested that

"...thinking about place is vital...to the effort to recreate a healthy relationship with our environment because it is also about rekindling the love that exists between people and places. Without affection, without feelings of responsibility for places, our surroundings become vulnerable to, well, just look around... The lost sense of responsibility for our surroundings gives greed its opportunity."

So, rekindling the love that exists between people and places...affection...feelings of responsibility for places...more important pieces to the puzzle.

An organization in Great Britain, Common Ground, has focused on what they term "local distinctiveness" as a key to fostering community responsibility for cultural resources. In their view:

"We are talking of quality in the everyday. Because these things are not straightforward or easy to pigeonhole, often involve emotional attachment and are hard to communicate, they are treated as "soft" by the media. Because they are impossible to put a money value on or to explain through equations, the unquantifiable "intangibles" are likely to be marginalized by the professionals. Debate rages, and decisions are taken which often leave out the very things that make life worth living."

Well, now, this might help explain some of the cynicism we confront, mightn't it? Are there decisions that leave out the very things that make life worth living? Or, perhaps just as often, with regard to land use, that undermine the things, the places, that community residents hold dear? Has this contributed to the proliferation of situations characterized as NIMBYs ("not in my back yard") and BANANAs ("build absolutely nothing anywhere near anyone")? Has our process of land use decision-making - the over-professionalized, over rationalized, formalistic process - sown some of the seeds of its own discrediting?

Daniel Kemmis, the Mayor of Missoula, Montana, and no stranger to difficult land use issues, has concluded that

"...the strengthening of political culture, the reclaiming of a vital and effective sense of what it is to be public, must take place and must be studied in the context of very specific places and of the people who struggle to live well in such places."

In his view:

"Places have a way of claiming people. When they claim very diverse kinds of people, then those people must eventually learn to live with each other; they must learn to inhabit their place together, which they can only do through the development of certain practices of inhabitation which both rely upon and nurture the old-fashioned civic virtues of trust, honesty, justice, toleration, cooperation, hope, and remembrance. It is through the nurturing of such virtues (and in no other way) that we might begin to reclaim that competency upon which democratic citizenship depends."

So, how does reading the landscape fit in?

To date, most initiatives involving landscape interpretation have been fairly academic in tone.

Generally their purpose has been to increase understanding of a particular element of the landscape - whether historic buildings or forest habitat. Few, if any, have sought to use this exercise to empower a community.

At the Glynwood Center we are developing a program that will attempt to use an interdisciplinary approach to reading the landscape as a catalyst for the development of civic capacity. It will do this in many ways:

- it will invite in the farmers, the naturalists, the local historians, the long-term residents who, for their lack of professional credentials, have often been excluded from our planning and environmental review processes. It will help them regain their voices and sense of political efficacy. It will allow communities to benefit from their knowledge.
- it will involve residents of all ages, to encourage the long-range view of how the community has evolved and how it is likely to continue to change.
- it will be broadly inclusive, and create the opportunity for diverse segments of the community to meet each other and begin to identify common interests and concerns, to develop trust in a nonthreatening, noncontroversial setting.
- it will have a broad focus and illuminate the interrelationships among varied cultural and natural resources, and the close ties between conservation and economic development.
- it will reveal the social context within which property rights are embedded, thereby helping shift the terms of that debate.
- it will identify significant choices made in the past, thereby encouraging residents to recognize the importance of the decisions that they make - or fail to make - today.
- To borrow a phrase from Common Ground, it will be "about history continuing through the present (not about the past) and ...about creating the future"...

In all of these ways, we believe that our approach to reading the landscape can contribute to reclaiming the competence and commitment upon which democratic citizenship - and thereby the communities and landscapes we love - depends.

Sources:

Clifford, Sue and Angela King. "Losing Your Place", in *Local Distinctiveness: Place, Particularity and Identity*, Essays for a conference, September 28, 1993, edited by Sue Clifford and Angela King. Common Ground: London, 1993.

Diamond, Henry L., and Patrick F. Noonan. *Land Use in America*. Island Press: Washington, D.C., 1996.

Kemmis, Daniel. *Community and the Politics of Place*. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, OK, 1990.

Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*. The M.I.T. Press: Cambridge, MA, 1960.

Orion Magazine. "From the Editors." Spring 1995.

Putnam, Robert D., *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press: Princeton. 1993

Judith M. LaBelle, President
Glynwood Center
P.O. Box 157
Cold Spring, NY 10516

rev. 9/24/96