Chapter 1
New Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Paying Attention to Political Economy and Social Justice

Don Mitchell

Although the word is seldom so used, it is proper and important to think of cultural landscape as nearly everything that we can see when we go outdoors. Such common workaday landscape has very little to do with the skilled work of landscape architects, but it has a great deal to say about the United States as a country and Americans as a people.

– Geographer Peirce Lewis, 1979

I think the landscape is everything outside the building footprint. It is the moment you walk out of the house and enter the world…. The asphalt is our landscape. The streets are our landscape. The landscape is everything out there, and it looks like hell. The United States is getting uglier and uglier. We are sprawling out, and so little value is given to our landscape.

– Landscape Architect Martha Schwartz, 2004

It has been more than 25 years since Peirce Lewis (1979) laid out his “Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene.” Lewis’s axioms were designed to help us better see how, as he put it (complete with italics), “all human landscape has cultural meaning, no matter how ordinary that landscape might be” (p. 12). The axioms, Lewis suggested, “seem basic and self-evident,” even if “what seems self-evident was not obvious to me a few years ago” (p. 15). By restating what he took to be obvious, Lewis’s sought to provide a set of simple guidelines for understanding the meaning of the cultural landscape, and for using that meaning – gleaned from “reading” the landscape (that is, careful observation and inductive reasoning) – to come to some conclusions about American culture. For him, aesthetic judgments about the landscape were secondary. Primary was the question of why the landscape looked the way it did. What clues did the landscape itself present as to its own making?

To answer that question, Lewis suggested seven axioms:

• Landscape is a clue to culture. It “provides strong evidence of the kind of people we are, and were, and are in the process of becoming” (p. 15). By reading the landscape we could glean important insights into “who we are.” As a corollary, Lewis argued, if landscapes looked different, it was because there were significantly different cultures at work. If they were growing more similar, it was because cultures were growing more similar. Moreover, both the diffusion of landscape items across space and local cultural “tastes” were central in giving landscape its particular look and feel.
Nearly every item in the landscape “reflect[s] culture in some way” (p. 18). We need to pay attention even to what at first glance might seem commonplace, trivial, or just plain haphazard and ugly. At the same time we need to make judgments about when an item really just is the idiosyncratic whim of an individual and thus truly is unique.

Landscapes are difficult to study “by conventional academic means” (p. 19). Rather, scholars need to turn to “nonacademic literature” (like trade journals, journalism, promotional literature, and advertisements). Most of all we need to train ourselves to “learn by looking” (as Lewis 1983, put it in a different piece): we need to train ourselves to pay attention to the visual evidence. (Lewis gives little idea of what constitutes “conventional academic means” but the sense is that it is limited to reading scholarly books).

History matters to the structure and look of a landscape. We inherit a landscape which forms the basis for any changes or developments we subsequently make. Change itself is uneven (historically “lumpy” [p. 23]). Both technological and cultural change comes in great leaps forward, perhaps more so than as gradual evolution.

Location matters too: “Elements of a cultural landscape make little cultural sense if they are studied outside their geographic (i.e., locational) context.” Indeed, “[t]o a large degree cultures dictate that certain activities should occur in certain places, and only those places” (p. 24). Thus “context matters” (p. 25).

So does physical environment, since “conquering geography’ is often a very expensive business.” Physical geography may not determine, but it does establish the limits of possibility and the costs of exceeding those limits.

Finally, while all items in the landscape convey meaning, they do not do so readily: meaning can be obscure. Even so “chances are” any disagreement over meaning “can be cleared up by visual evidence” (p. 27).

How the visual evidence, which is “obscure” as to its meanings, can clear things up is never explained. Even so, Lewis’s faith in “reading” has been infectious, attracting adherents not only in geography, but in landscape architecture and other fields as well. Following not only Lewis, but also landscape pioneers like J.B. Jackson, many were swayed by Lewis’s argument that “One can … quite literally teach oneself how to see, and that is something that most Americans have not done and should do” (p. 27).

And yet, even as Lewis’s axioms were being codified, their “self-evident” nature was being undermined by other trends in landscape studies,¹ trends that took a decidedly more critical – and historical – approach to understanding what the landscape was, and what it meant. Radical geographers like Denis Cosgrove (1984, 1985, 1993) and Stephen Daniels (1989, 1993; Cosgrove and Daniels 1988), inspired by developments in art history and incipient cultural studies, began to

¹ Even if, oddly, their rather chaotic and contradictory nature has rarely been criticized. It is amazing how little has been said about Lewis’s odd notion that obscure meanings, if looked at hard enough, will reveal answers to even the thorniest scholastic questions.