

The World Turned Inside Out

In the second half of the 20th century, a fundamental reversal occurred in the way we relate to the physical landscape. Whereas nature once framed the works of man, the sprawling works of man now threaten to overwhelm nature. If we are to cope with this new configuration, we must first understand its deepest meaning.

by Suzannah Lessard

It has long been striking to me that people who write about place, even from the most scholarly or technical perspective, often find a way to introduce their own childhood experiences into otherwise impersonal texts. These references, inevitably, have an emotional timbre that is in startling contrast to otherwise rigorously cerebral approaches. And yet, the reminiscent passages seem to thrust their way to the surface as irrepressible touchstones of truth—messengers from what playwrights call the backstory, the unspoken experience out of which the spoken arises.

But the actual evolution of thought from backstory to professional perspective is rarely unfolded. In particular, that intermediate zone where personal experience meets political reality, the truly formative stage of education by place, tends to remain mysterious. As I lay out here my own experience of that zone, I mean to suggest nothing absolute. I know that even minute gradations in period, location, family background, and personal proclivities could change everything. Indeed, the very point of recounting the experience is to acknowledge the relativity that governs our deepest ideas about places. The great paradox of place is that it's the most personal, and also the most common, thing. Therefore, no place education is purely relative. It's a connection to a history that we share.

My education by place began in the 1940s, and had three major components, of which a love affair with the rural landscape of Long Island was the first and the deepest. A certain kind of 19th-century American landscape painting, known as "luminist," perfectly captures the way I saw the landscape around me when I was growing up. The subject of those paintings is usually ordinary—such as a field at dusk or a bit of beach with some weather gathering—and most often it is of a fleeting moment. And yet the moment has a feeling of timelessness about it, and the paintings convey a sense of being alone with something hidden but large. When, as a teenager, I first encountered these luminist works, I thought that I was looking into my own soul.

In appreciating both the paintings and the landscape, I also felt that I was being touched by something uniquely American—as indeed I was, though what was uniquely American was a certain way of seeing the landscape and a set of feelings attached to that way of seeing: a sense of aloneness, both societal and personal, and a sense of national specialness and providential protection. The feelings belonged more to the 19th century than to my own.

That I should be so in tune with a 19th-century way of seeing was not unusual. It takes decades, maybe a century, for a culture to catch up with the worlds it creates and, subsequently, understand them. Of necessity, we see with the eyes of the past. Our 19th-centu-



Approaching Thunder Storm (1859), by the luminist painter Martin Johnson Heade

ry landscape painters were chasing after a world that had already been lost; after all, their contemporary world was disrupted by the Industrial Revolution, which does not appear in the luminist paintings at all. This delay in perception is an example of a many-layered history quietly structuring one's thoughts in deceptive ways. So there I was, a child of the 20th century, unconsciously formed by 19th-century longings for the 18th century.

Behind that unconsciously layered view of the American landscape there was set down in my mind an even more ancient notion of the basic configuration of the landscape—the assumption that the natural world was vast and enclosing, that it encompassed cities, towns, and villages and served as their mysterious, indissoluble context. The prototype is medieval: the enclosed hill town surrounded by the Umbrian landscape, with savage mountains—the wilderness—in the distance. The town occupies the foreground, but it derives its significance in relation to the natural world in the background, to which the town contrasts in a variety of ways that give it meaning.

Of course, over time a much more romantic and benign idea of the landscape developed in our culture. We began to see landscape as a subject in its own right and brought it into the foreground, moving towns and villages into the distance, if they were depicted at all. Whereas in medieval times the wilderness was hostile, in

19th-century America painters saw the natural world as an infinitely meaningful providential cradle, a safety net under the human condition. That sense of being enclosed in a vast and benign context was what the field at dusk or the bit of beach revealed—empty, and yet so pregnant with invisible presence, so intimately and eloquently seen, by the painter, by me. American painting emphasized the providential significance of the natural world (even as we were in the process of raping it). And most contemporary representations of American landscapes in my world—Christmas cards, calendars, picture books—also reinforced the assumption that we were profoundly safe in a landscape that enclosed the world built by man.

The second major element in my education was a powerful, unacknowledged reality that pounded me at a subrational level with a lesson whose meaning was just the opposite of the message of safety and enclosure that the traditional ideas conveyed. That other reality was the most fundamental truth of the century: Whereas for all of history we had conducted our affairs in the cradle of providence, in the course of the 20th century we had become capable of destroying that cradle by our own hands. Those were the early days of the Cold War, when adults were telling children to hide under their desks if nuclear holocaust should end the world. The message was that we

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had become both all-powerful and pathetically helpless, in a way the human race had never been before. We had the power to destroy our environment, and we might not be able to keep ourselves from using it. What a paradox that was, and yet nothing much in the culture helped us with its riddles. Apart from the drills and the talk of shelters, little was said about the extraordinary change in the relationship between man and the natural landscape that had occurred through this pervasive but invisible danger of our own making. The change, in effect, was the end of providence. We were now our own custodians, though stumbling around in the role.

This change penetrated the meaning of everything, and the landscape in particular, and yet nothing at all changed physically. That was especially perplexing. The invisibility of the inversion in our relationship to the world had the effect of falsifying the landscape for me. The field at dusk and the bit of beach looked the same, and yet seen with the knowledge of our new state, they seemed to have become ghosts of their former selves, or to be in disguise. It was as if they lied. Complex factors in the history of art, most of them technical, led to abstraction. But I am convinced that there is also a connection between the disappearance of the physical landscape from art in the mid-20th century and the nuclear inversion of our relation to place. Because we no longer had an understanding of our relation to the landscape, it was logical for artists to turn to an interior dimension of experience.

But through all this, society acted as if we were on an uninterrupted continuum with the past. Even arms negotiations—noticed as I got older—proceeded as if the safety net were still there. And because the old composition of the world was relentlessly reinforced by everything from Christmas cards to high literature, it was easy enough for me to carry on my love affair with an old idea of the landscape. This, my heritage told me, was the timeless thing, the deepest thing—even as I was permeated with a subverbal awareness that, in fact, the world had been turned inside out, and that nothing was what it seemed.

The third component of my childhood

education was a brutally visible manifestation of history moving plainly across the landscape and rendering it physically unrecognizable: suburbanization. In the late 1940s and the 1950s, Long Island became the fastest-growing area in the country. I saw the advancing development only as rapine. My feelings of violation and loss were constant, brought on by the disappearance of specific places that had meaning for me. But I also felt a kind of confusion that was linked to a larger undoing of the structure of landscape. Though a built world, suburbia spread out as only farmland or wildernesses (or the sea) were supposed to do. It engulfed not only the countryside but towns and villages too, dissolving their discrete definition, draining them of their centripetal character. In so doing, it broke down the age-old distinction between city and country—and, along with it, untold layers of inherited understanding of the world.

A romantic 19th-century eye could not make sense of the suburban landscape—could not find place in it at all. I regarded those parts of my countryside that became suburban as a kind of nothing, like splotches of plaster in a fresco where the painting has worn away. As time went on and the suburban splotches spread, they began to link up, surrounding and isolating what stretches of countryside remained. There comes a point in the life of a declining fresco when so much plaster is evident that one can no longer make a whole out of the bits of painting that remain. In similar fashion, it grew harder and harder to make a landscape out of what became increasingly smaller islands of countryside in suburban seas.

What was evolving was a landscape in which the built world surrounded and framed the natural world, instead of the other way around. Instead of Assisi surrounded by Umbria, we have bits of Umbria surrounded by a vast Assisi. In the visual arts, that is called a figure-field reversal. In such an inversion of landscape composition lies the radical nature of suburbanization, although many years would pass before I could accept that, and before I could regard the new landscape as something

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Rising above the horizon of the Moon beyond Smyth's Sea on the lunar terrain, the Earth, as photographed by the Apollo spacecraft in July 1969, appears, at once, complete, vulnerable, and majestic.

to look at in itself—or as a meaningful landscape at all. The very word *suburbia* saved me from needing to see it by implying that this landscape was an appendage of cities, a secondary thing. Thus, to the extent that the word dissolved the old distinction between city and country, it did so only as a form of transition between the two. The word clearly suggested that if you traveled far enough from the city, you would inevitably come to the end of the suburbs too, and would enter the wide “unspoiled” natural world. And so, though misshapen, the old template of city surrounded by country remained intact in my mind. Suburbia could be ignored because, somewhere out there, the old countryside rolled away into the night, in all its innocence and encompassing transcendence.

Thus, I approached adulthood with an impossibly unintegrated sense of place, in which a 19th-century vision that seemed profoundly true conflicted with the nuclear and suburban inversions of which no sense could be made at all. Then, two very public events in the 1960s had an additional major impact on my—and probably everyone’s—

sense of place. The first was the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, during which it seemed that a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union was imminent. The crisis removed the possibility of pandemic destruction from the realm of the theoretical, and the trauma generated in me, as in many others, an annihilating, mind-blanking fear. The actuality of the crisis brought the compositional bizarreness of the nuclear predicament out of abstraction. What difference did it make if the missiles were near or far? On what pretext did one risk world incineration? And yet, in the long run, the crisis seemed to normalize the nuclear predicament. It was fashioned, in retrospect, into a traditional story of courage under pressure and the triumph of heroes. Our survival enabled us to tell the story to ourselves as if it had taken place in a providentially secured world.

The second event of enormous consequence to the relationship of mankind to the landscape was our arrival on the moon in 1969. Where the actuality of the missile crisis had been isolating and mind blanking, the moon landing created a sense of wholeness and connectedness. Events in space inevitably

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tend to heighten our consciousness of humanity as a family, but this event was very special. My parents were in France at the time, and I remember hearing how the bells of Solemnes, the Benedictine monastery where monks devote their lives to medieval chant, rang out in the middle of the night in celebration.

We thought that we were on the threshold of an age of space travel. But the greatest impact of the trip to the moon was on how we view the Earth. Photographs taken by the astronauts showed our planet as it had never been seen by the human eye—complete, finite, beautiful—framed by a limitless blackness. The lasting impression of space left by the moon-shot was of its inhospitality rather than of its inviting qualities as a frontier. Interest in space travel in fact dwindled in the succeeding decades, while the environmental movement burgeoned, launched by that eloquent image of our free-floating Earth.

Environmentalism arises out of an awareness similar to that implied by nuclear weapons—a planetary consciousness, a sense that responsibility has shifted from providence and Mother Nature to ourselves. The two dangers—from nuclear weapons and from pollution of the environment by peaceable processes and inventions—are certainly not in competition; indeed, nuclear weapons could be said to pose the ultimate environmental hazard. But of the two, the nuclear situation is surely the more difficult to understand. It makes us too big—bigger than we know how to be, or than any foreground could hold. It introduced confusions of scale from the beginning, as, for example, in the statement physicist Robert Oppenheimer made at Trinity Site: “I have become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” The statement implied that there were many worlds and a place to stand securely apart as we destroyed this one.

The environmental predicament is a softer, more manageable truth. The photographic image of Earth in space evokes the composition of the medieval landscape, in which the hill town is a compact and self-contained whole within a limitless but barren context. The picture makes it easy to grasp the meaning of the term “space-ship Earth,” or the idea of the globe as a single ecosystem. Further, the awesome black infinity

in which we are enclosed and our feelings of smallness before it are eloquently addressed within our cultural heritage—by the sensibility of Gregorian chant, for example. In contrast, our heritage cannot help us shape a response to the nuclear situation, in which man is too big for the foreground to hold, and there is no background at all.

With the Cuban Missile Crisis and the moon landing, the first stage of my education by place was complete. In the next stage, I began to write. It was not that I wrote directly about place, but that I tended to interpret whatever subject I took up through the medium of place. That led me to turn many places into a language of a kind. I learned to ask of landscape, “What does it seem to mean?” and “What does it really mean?” The answers to the two questions were often polar opposites and surprising in their implications. For example, I learned to pose the questions to my childhood landscape—the touchstone of truth that I had taken for a simple 19th-century landscape reflecting a kind of purity in the American relationship to place. The questions forced me to face something I knew about that landscape and yet had preferred to overlook: that it was actually the “Gold Coast” of Long Island, a landscape of fading Gilded Age estates on its northern shore.

That my beloved, mystically profound landscape reflected the shallowest, most deluded period in our history was shocking enough. Even more unsettling was the connection between the countryside and the suburban incursions that the revelation pushed me to accept. The values underlying the Gilded Age estates—escape from the city, land for leisure and status, isolation, the exclusion of commerce—were actually precursors of the suburban ideal. (Suburban subdivisions often call themselves “estates.”) In other words, far from having annihilated the older landscape, the suburban one was derived directly from it, with the difference that it reflected an alternative distribution. It was a landscape of a little for many, rather than of a lot for a few. And was that reality not a truer reflection of the American soul than any field or bit of beach could ever yield? Didn’t that changing, upwardly mobile, inclusive society—the churning thing that America

is—didn't that loathed landscape in truth represent our best hope?

After I had written about place and architecture in a variety of indirect ways for many years, the time came to take on the subject directly. And that brought me, a mature writer in the middle of life, to the present stage of my education. The landscape of America would be my subject, of that I had no doubt. But what aspect of landscape? I engaged with landscapes about which I was curious—farmland, an edge city, a southern town, a metropolis in the Rust Belt. In each I delved and listened and looked, and asked my questions: "What is this landscape in fact, and what does it mean?" I did not go looking for sprawl. Indeed, I rather avoided the suburban landscape. But to sum up a long, inductive process, what I found on my journeys was that, in one way or another, visibly or invisibly, sprawl was everywhere. It was the shaping force in our landscape. It was the ascendant, determining place form of our time.

Sprawl was there in central Kentucky, for example, where a seamless pastoral quilt

extended to the horizon, but where, in fact, international real-estate companies were snapping up every farm that came on the market. The companies were banking on projections that development would eventually fill the entire triangle between Louisville, Cincinnati, and Lexington, even as, outside that triangle, abandonment set in—it, too, a consequence of sprawl. The central squares of small towns in Pennsylvania were often lovingly restored and exuded a confident air of establishment, while the spill on the outskirts—the box store, the gas stations, the chain restaurants with their sky-high signs—was amorphous and jerry-built. But the squares were empty, while the parking lots on the outskirts were full of cars, and the stores and restaurants were full of people. The seemingly timeless towns had been reduced in the space of a few decades to barnacles on the back of an octopus, and, again, the determining force was sprawl.

Sprawl was invisibly present in the central cities, famously drained by flight to the suburbs. Some cities were returning literally to the wild: In Youngstown, Ohio, I found lawns gone to hay,



In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a sprawling subdivision redefines a landscape once dominated by farmland.

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around ruinous houses with vines taking over the outbuildings. Cities that had survived experienced a physical invasion of sprawl. In Brooklyn, New York, the puffy toyland gigantism of a suburban-style mall made the row houses, the little shops, even the churches seem shabby and tiny, almost illusory, as if they were in a faded old photograph of a city that existed long ago. In Harlem, windswept fields of rubble had the eloquent ghostliness of old battlefields, while renewal on 125th Street meant the introduction of suburban-style movie theaters and chain stores.

Sprawl was there in the old-fashioned New England landscape that was really the preserve of millionaires who used their wealth to keep out sprawl. In the age of sprawl, a natural-looking rural landscape has become a form of conspicuous consumption as surely as a formal park was in aristocratic Europe. Sprawl was present too in the agricultural landscapes of Maryland that had been preserved from sprawl by the edict of the state; this farmland, over time, would become more and more museum-like, which is something quite different from self-sustaining farmland. In other words, sprawl defined these landscapes by its absence: To see them truly, you had to understand them in relation to sprawl. One of the things I learned on my journey was that in the age of sprawl, many landscapes—the New England countryside, the preserved farmland—are not what they appear to be, with the notable exception of sprawl itself, which, though rife with affectations—shopping malls built to look like medieval villages, subdivisions called Camelot—is always exactly what it appears to be.

Above all, nature was not what it appeared to be, or what I wanted it to be, or what centuries of culture had taught me it would always be. As I had noticed in childhood, instead of being the context for the built world, nature in the landscape of sprawl was framed by the built world. When I saw that sprawl was ubiquitous, that great inversion also seemed to me to be pervasive. Even on the wildest mountaintop, I came to feel that sprawl was present—in the consciousness one had of the absence of the human world. That consciousness now surrounded nature. Even the mountaintop—or the shore, or the desert—was not “the country” in counterpoint to “the

city.” The mountaintop was really not wild at all; it was more of a sanctuary, a protected place. It was sprawl—proliferating endlessly, out of control—that was wild, that needed civilizing. Our nature, not Mother Nature, framed the world and supplied its principal dangers.

I had known this from my earliest days, in the eerie effect of the nuclear reality on the meaning of the landscape. Surely the invention of the bomb dissolved forever the old distinction between city and country. And surely the moonshot sealed those changes. After the moonshot, we could see with our own eyes that Earth was “the city” and space was “the country”—a natural setting more desolate and inhospitable than any conceived by a medieval imagination. But what was new for me in this period was a closing in, from various quarters, of what I had experienced as separate shafts of awareness. The confluence revealed that the world in which I lived and traveled and sought the solaces of nature, the world in which politics took place—that is to say, the landscape in its entirety—was structured by the fundamental shift that had occurred in the 20th century, the movement from a natural environment that is larger than we are to a configuration in which man surrounds nature, literally in many cases but figuratively everywhere. The convergence established the primacy of what I had come to think of as the nuclear truth, that preposterous configuration in which we are responsible for the ground we stand on, a figure-field reversal of a moral kind.

Sprawl was not literally everywhere, but it was the landscape that had emerged over the past half-century, created by the same technology that brought about the fundamental shift. The technology made a spreading, decentralized world inevitable, a world in which the distinction between city and country was dissolved and the works of man framed nature. Sprawl was the physical reflection of a world turned inside out.

Thus did I come to see that sprawl is our quintessentially contemporary landscape. It is a text of who we are in relation to each other and to the world. And because it reflects our condition on many levels, it has a certain legitimacy. Of course, much about it is also destructive and out of control and needs to be

brought into the realm of intention. But I have concluded that in order to do this effectively we must first accept sprawl's fundamental legitimacy—its inevitability—as a form. The essence of that form, in my view, is the figure-field reversal, the inversion of the old landscape in which the natural world framed the architectural world. At this new stage of my education and my work, I see no point in trying to reconstitute either the cityscapes or the landscapes of other centuries, dear to us and meaningful as they may be. Why bother to put boundaries around cities to re-establish or protect the old distinction between city and country, when sprawl has already shown that it will leapfrog over regulated areas and proliferate far beyond them? Why build enclaves modeled on old-fashioned towns when the enclaves are in fact surrounded not by old-fashioned countryside, as the form would suggest, but by oceans of sprawl? Any effective solution, I believe, requires us to accept the figure-field reversal implicit in the form of sprawl and begin to work—aesthetically, practically, spiritually, emotionally, environmentally, responsibly—with *that* configuration.

The idea of accepting a figure-field reversal is not so far-fetched, or without precedent in the work of landscape thinkers of the past. None goes quite so far as to state that the reversal has occurred, but each helps make it possible for us to view the world that way. Frederick Law Olmsted, for example, saw nature as something to be managed and molded, and liked suburban settings best. Frank Lloyd Wright thought he invented suburbia, and saw in it a kind of utopia. The planner Benton MacKaye rejected urban growth boundaries in the 1930s and urged instead that green space be intruded into cities. Lewis Mumford advocated a scattering of metropolitan growth into the countryside. The landscape architect Ian McHarg proposed that ecology govern the shape of the built world, and thereby implicitly acknowledged the figure-field reversal. Among our contemporaries, the architect Peter Calthorpe has drawn plans that accept the decentralized nature of sprawl as a regional city, and the geographer Peirce Lewis has called sprawl a “Galactic City”—more like the Milky Way and its spread-out, disseminating pat-

tern than like the solar system, which suggests a 19th-century hierarchy of towns and villages around a central metropolis. The environmental historian William Cronon has debunked the idea of wilderness as a 19th-century construct. He sees all nature as historical now and has challenged environmentalists to focus on the nature in our midst—suburban nature, enclosed nature—rather than to indulge in a cultish fiction of wilderness. The work of all these thinkers can help us bring sprawl into the realm of intention in ways that work with its nature instead of fighting its nature, and that draw on its deep meaning instead of denying that it has meaning.

My education by place has led me to the wholly unexpected conclusion that the landscape of sprawl is the most interesting subject one could find. In it, some of the principal issues of our time converge. But I must mention one particular aspect of sprawl separately because it is so important to every other consideration, and because it is usually left out of the picture. Though sprawl is a factor in the decline of cities and the abandonment of the underclass, and though there can be no question that, with sprawl, a new divide—economic, social, and geographical—has appeared in our landscape, and no question that this divide must be a central component of any treatment of sprawl, the larger truth is that the landscape of sprawl is a landscape of upward mobility and assimilation in America. It is not monolithic, as is commonly believed, but it is panoramically middle class. True, there are gated communities, and communities that distinguish themselves by tiny differences in income. But they are all indelibly middle class. And yes, there are mansions on the landscape, but most of them are called McMansions, hardly a nickname one would attach to the architecture of a tyrannical or exploitative elite.

I would venture that suburban sprawl as it emerged in the second half of the 20th century is probably the most democratic man-made landscape ever created on a national scale. That is its nature; that is what lies at the heart of the form. It is the landscape of a little for many, and however we seek to reconfigure it—and we *must* seek to reconfigure it—we must start with that truth. □