A Sense of PLACE, a Sense of TIME
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John Brinckerhoff Jackson

J. B. Jackson, a pioneer in the field of landscape studies, here takes us on a tour of American landscapes past and present, showing how our surroundings reflect important changes in our culture.

Because we live in urban and industrial environments that are constantly evolving, says Jackson, time and movement are increasingly important to us, place and permanence less so. We no longer gain a feeling of community from where we live or assemble but from common work hours, habits, and customs. Jackson examines the new vernacular landscape of trailers, parking lots, trucks, loading docks, and suburban garages, which all reflect this emphasis on mobility and transience; he redefines roads as scenes of work and leisure and social intercourse—as places rather than as means of getting to places; he argues that public parks are now primarily for children, older people, and nature lovers, while more mobile or gregarious people seek recreation in shopping malls, in the street, and in sports arenas; he discusses the form and function of dwellings in New Mexico, from prehistoric Pueblo villages to mobile homes; and he criticizes the tendency of some environmentalists to venerate nature instead of interacting with it and learning to share it with others.

Written with Jackson's customary lucidity and elegance, this book reveals his passion for vernacular culture, his insights into a style of life that blurs the boundaries between work and leisure, between middle and working classes, and between public and private spaces.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson is the founder of Landscape magazine and has taught the history of the American landscape at Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley.

Also by John Brinckerhoff Jackson and available from Yale University Press

Discovering the Vernacular Landscape
"Incisive and overpoweringly influential."
—Thomas Hine, Philadelphia Inquirer

"Jackson’s own vernacular style, unlike the vernacular discussed in the book, bears the hallmarks of an intensely crafted form."
—David Lowenthal, Geographical Review

Printed in the U.S.A.
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(Photograph by Bill Owens from Suburbia. San Francisco, 1972)
Most foreign visitors to the United States end up liking us. It is our landscape that bewilders them and that they find hard to understand. They are repelled by its monotony: the long straight roads and highways, the immense rectangular fields and the lonely white farmhouses, all much alike. They remind us that in Europe every city has individuality, whereas in our country it is often hard to distinguish one city from another. With the possible exception of Boston and New Orleans and San Francisco, they not only are lacking in architectural variety, they are lacking in landmarks and in unique neighborhoods. We are often asked how we who live in the midst of such monotony can have any sense of place.

I find this hard to answer. Most of us, I suspect, without giving much thought to the matter, would say that a sense of place, a sense of being at home in a town or city, grows as we become accustomed to it and learn to know its peculiarities. It is my own belief that a sense of place is something that we ourselves create in the course of time. It is the result of habit or custom. But others disagree. They believe that a sense of place comes from our response to features which are already there—either a beautiful natural setting or well-designed architecture. They believe that a sense of place comes from being in an unusual composition of spaces and forms—natural or man-made.

In any case, plenty of thoughtful Americans see eye to eye with those foreign critics and wish that we could somehow give our downtown areas a sense of place. Much has been accomplished, in fact, in America in the way of injecting life and design into the decaying central city: the streets have sometimes been turned into pedestrian walks with brick pavements and fountains, adorned with planters and brilliant flowerbeds. Small parks with rows of trees and a piece of abstract sculpture have been inserted between the glass high-rise buildings, and many efforts have been made to conceal the original grid layout of the downtown area. There are concerts of Baroque music in the new minipark.
and ethnic pageants, each of them featuring the costumes and dances and food specialties of a group.

On such occasions the whole area is brought to life. A kind of invisible confetti fills the air, and we feel that the central city has at last become an exciting and stylish part of town, the old monotony banished forever. The sense of place is reinforced by what might be called a sense of recurring events.

I have recently had a chance to see what has been done in the way of revitalization in such cities as Dallas and Houston and Denver and Oklahoma City and Memphis and even Little Rock. I had the feeling that this expensive facelift affected the rest of the city very little. Architecture buffs enjoy the results, and so do tourists, but if you are a resident of the city or merely on your way to work, you see the display in a different light.

Say you are passing through the renovated downtown late at night: you then find that the dominant feature of the scene is not the cluster of magnificent forms and spaces; it is the long and empty view of evenly spaced, periodically changing red and green traffic lights along Main Street. The tall glass buildings, so imposing by day, are half-hidden in darkness and stand to one side to allow the street to thrum ahead, unimpeded. It cuts through the less opulent parts of town, the block after block of silent, nondescript houses like the houses in every other American city. It goes through the tree-grown suburbs and parallels the complex of warehouses and parking lots and industrial plants until at last it turns into an interstate highway, heading into the dark and featureless countryside.

The highway never seems to end. There is an occasional brightly lit truck stop and the lights of a bypassed town. Rows of trucks are parked for the night at rest areas, and with the hours of solitary travel there comes a mood of introspection. A favorite episode in novels and movies and television shows laid in the American heartland is that lonesome ride through the night landscape: an occasion for remembering other times. You think back over your past, think about your work, think about your destination and about those you have left. The dashboard display shows how fast you are driving, tells you the hour and how many more miles you still have to go. The sameness of the American landscape overwhelms and liberates you from any sense of place. Familiarity makes you feel everywhere at home. A sense of time passing makes you gradually increase your speed.

This all-pervading sameness is by and large the product of the grid—not simply the grid of streets in every town and city west of the Mississippi, but that enormous grid which covers two-thirds of the nation, stretching from the Mississippi and Ohio to the Pacific, from the Rio Grande to the Canadian border, beyond which it extends in a slightly modified form well into the northern subarctic forest. It is this grid, not the eagle or the stars and stripes, which is our true national emblem. I think it must be imprinted at the moment of conception on every American child, to remain throughout his or her life a way of calculating not only space but movement.

Let me say something about the impact of the grid on a part of the country that I am familiar with: the High Plains. It stretches along the eastern slope of the Rockies from Canada to Mexico, and as far as Iowa and Missouri and Arkansas to the east. It is magnificent, undulating country, and before white settlers arrived it was where hundreds
of thousands of buffalo grazed on the expanse of short grass. The wind blows incessantly. The High Plains now contains many wheat farms and ranches, and when you fly over it you are struck by the miles and miles of perfectly round green fields, the product of pivot irrigation. The population is not large, and except for Denver and Omaha it has no cities with more than two hundred thousand people. None of them—again, with the exception of Denver—is brilliant or exciting, but they seem prosperous. What I particularly like are the pleasant residential districts: the streets of small, comfortable houses, each with a backyard and a well-kept lawn, each with a pickup on the driveway, streets that reach for miles and miles to where the open, treeless rangeland begins.

Since the High Plains is lacking in sensational topographical features and is wide open, it is an excellent place to observe how overpowering the national grid system can be. It is easy to suppose that when the first settlers confronted this monotonous sea of waving grass, they must have longed to divide it into squares and rectangles in order to give it something like a human scale. The round fields of their descendants suggest the same liking for simple geometrical forms, which can in fact be extremely handsome.

The grid system was already a familiar American landscape feature, almost a hundred years old when the High Plains was being settled in the decades after the Civil War. But whereas in the older states of Ohio and Indiana and Illinois (where the heritage of the colonial farm village lingered) the straight lines of the grid were valued as an efficient and democratic way of organizing individual landholdings, west of the Missouri the grid played a much more decisive role: it was the only practical and speedy method of organizing space. Its long-range effect was to eliminate, once and for all, the impact of tradition and traditional spaces, and of topographical factors, in the forming of the new High Plains landscape. A composition of identical rectangular spaces extending out of sight in every direction, ignoring all inherent differences, produced a landscape of empty, interchangeable divisions like the squares in a checkerboard. In the course of time these were put to several different uses and thus acquired individuality, but in this very level, very uniform terrain, there was always the temptation to consider all uses as temporary. Space, rather than land, was what the settlers bought, and it was so easy to buy, so easy to sell, that commitment to a specific plan for the future must have been difficult for many. Freedom from tradition and freedom from topographical constraints was something they had never known before.

That is probably why the early history of the region reads less like an account of pioneer farming than of endless land speculation. A man could buy a sizeable piece of land, survey it and lay out a grid of broad streets, divide the blocks into uniform building lots, and when he had advertised that land in his town was to be sold at auction on a certain day, he had only to wait for buyers. They soon came. Someone opened a store, families built small houses on the lots, and a church was erected. But the attraction of other vacant spaces was strong, and the inhabitants of not a few of those new towns or villages moved their houses a few miles distant to be near a new railroad line—or the promise of a railroad line. When this happened, all that was left of the original town site was the empty store, the empty church, and the grid of broad, empty streets quickly merging back into the wind-blown landscape of grass.

This freedom to move from place to place and to use space as you saw fit, determined—and still determines—much of the planning and architectural design throughout the West. In the early days when everyone had or could have land, there seemed to be no reason for setting any land aside for such a specialized purpose as public enjoyment, and except for a vacant block called a park, no space was given a permanent public identity. None was dedicated (in the legal sense of the word) to community needs. Even the dwelling was thought of in temporary terms. When settlers eventually had enough money to build substantial houses, the plans and designs were simple and easy to execute. At the back of the builder's mind was the notion that in time he and his family would sell the homestead and move away. Farm journals and agricultural bulletins and emigrant handbooks cautioned settlers against making their houses too personal, too individual, lest they be hard to sell. Modest though most of the dwellings were, they were sturdy and efficient and without pretense, and a cluster of those plain angular forms, successfully defying the wind, the bitter cold, and the overall horizontality of the landscape, is a spectacle you are likely to remember: it was and is a unique regional style in the sense that it rejected any of the characteristics of the environment, of the natural region.

We are fortunate in having an abundance of pictures and plans as well as first-hand descriptions of many of those mid-nineteenth-century western towns. The best way to study the material is by comparing it
with the plans and pictures of earlier eastern towns. Even before the Revolution there were a number of grid towns in the colonies, but their grid layout was in the nature of a symmetrical design, a way of giving the plan a symbolic balance and unity. As the settlers moved farther west, the grid layout gradually ignored that concern for composition, and we notice the disappearance of dedicated public spaces—the central green or square, the marketplace, the drill field. By the end of the nineteenth century the average western town was likely to contain a small park at most, and its chief public space was its busiest commercial street—Main Street, or the street leading to the depot. As the economy and the population of the town underwent changes, some other street would usually become more important, and the solidly built-up row of stores and banks on Main Street was left to decay.

The tradition of a central green or square is a very old one, and contemporary planners and architects and preservationists try to keep it alive. But it really functions as a public gathering place and symbol of unity only when the town knows how to use it. The population of many American towns comes from all over the United States and Europe. When each ethnic element has its own church, its own kind of employment, its own idea of public life, the central square means very little. A flexible and frequently shifting arrangement of streets and spaces, adjusted to new real estate values and an increased traffic flow, becomes general: residential quarters, instead of grouping around the business section, tend to move out to where the immediate future is more predictable.

So the dwellings are thinly scattered. There is inevitably something like a concentration of the older homes near Main Street and the depot. Houses, most of them small but some of them sizable, stand at lonely crossroads or by themselves on an otherwise vacant block. You wonder what made the family choose to build so far from neighbors and the center of town: Were they perhaps squatters? Were they anticipating the expansion in real estate activity? Were they small-farmers? Any of these explanations may have been possible. Most of us, I think, have been taught that the ideal settlement pattern is one which is compact and clearly defined. A tight composition of streets and houses and spaces, with something like a landmark in the center, is generally considered normal and desirable: it is more picturesque, it is easier to control and, in earlier times, easier to defend. It encourages social interaction and it produces a colorful street life; it is convenient for pedestrians. It has a sense of place. All this is true, but it is hard to ignore the widespread evidence that many people, perhaps the majority, prefer to live at some distance from neighbors and community institutions. The establishment does what it can to keep us together. In colonial New England the church authorities forbade anyone to live more than a mile from the meeting house. Yet people continued to move out, and Captain John Smith complained that the very first colonists in Virginia wanted to abandon Jamestown and settle far from neighbors.

The truth is, Americans are of two minds as to how we ought to live. Publicly we say harsh things about urban sprawl and suburbia, and we encourage activity in the heart of town. In theory, but only in theory, we want to duplicate the traditional compact European community where everyone takes part in a rich and diversified public life. But at the same time most of us are secretly pining for a secluded hideaway, a piece of land, or a small house in the country where we can lead an intensely private nonurban existence, staying close to home. I am not entirely sure that this is a real contradiction. While we agree that scattering and the dying central city are both of them unsightly and illogical, we also, I think, feel a deep and persistent need for privacy and independence in our domestic life. That is why the freestanding dwelling on its own well-defined plot of land, whether in a prosperous residential neighborhood or in impoverished urban fringes, is so persistent a feature of our landscape. That is why our downtown areas, however vital they may be economically, are so lacking in what is called a sense of place.

"Sense of place" is a much used expression, chiefly by architects but taken over by urban planners and interior decorators and the promoters of condominiums, so that now it means very little. It is an awkward and ambiguous modern translation of the Latin term *genius loci*. In classical times it meant not so much the place itself as the guardian divinity of that place. It was believed that a locality—a space or a structure or a whole community—derived much of its unique quality from the presence or guardianship of a supernatural spirit. The visitor and the inhabitants were always aware of that benign presence and paid reverence to it on many occasions. The phrase thus implied celebration or ritual, and the location itself acquired a special status. Our modern culture rejected the notion of a divine or supernatural presence, and in the eighteenth century the Latin phrase was usually translated as "the
genius of a place," meaning its influence. Travelers would say that they
stayed in Rome for a month or so in order to savor the genius of the city.
We now use the current version to describe the atmosphere to a place, the
quality of its environment. Nevertheless, we recognize that certain localities
have an attraction which gives us a certain indefinable sense of well-
being and which we want to return to, time and again. So that original
notion of ritual, of repeated celebration or reverence, is still inherent in
the phrase. It is not a temporary response, for it persists and brings us
back, reminding us of previous visits.

So one way of defining such localities would be to say that they
are cherished because they are embedded in the everyday world around
us and easily accessible, but at the same time are distinct from that world.
A visit to one of them is a small but significant event. We are refreshed
and elated each time we are there. I cannot really define such localities
any more precisely. The experience varies in intensity; it can be private
and solitary, or convivial and social. The place can be a natural setting
or a crowded street or even a public occasion. What moves us is our
change of mood, the brief but vivid event. And what automatically en-
sues, it seems to me, is a sense of fellowship with those who share the
experience, and the instinctive desire to return, to establish a custom of
repeated ritual.

I realize that this definition automatically excludes many locali-
ties which a careless use of the term endows with a sense of place. I think
it is essential that we do exclude many current usages. But to return to
the American scene, particularly to the average American western town
or city, I would say that for historical reasons few of them have structures
or spaces which produce any vivid sense of political place. What until
very recently we have had are spaces and events related to the family and
the small neighborhood group. By that I mean not merely the home—
which in the past was the basic example of the sense of place—but also
those places and structures connected with ritual and with a restricted
fellowship or membership—places which we could say were extensions
of the dwelling or the neighborhood: the school, the church, the lodge,
the cemetery, the playing field. Ask the average American of the older
generation what he or she most clearly remembers and cherishes about
the home town and its events and the answer will rarely be the public
square, the monuments, the patriotic celebrations. What come to mind
are such nonpolitical, nonarchitectural places and events as commence-
ment, a revival service in a tent, a traditional football rivalry game, a
country fair, and certain family celebrations. For all of these have those
qualities I associate with a sense of place: a lively awareness of the familiar
environment, a ritual repetition, a sense of fellowship based on a shared
experience.

These localities are many of them out-of-date. As our cities
have grown we have come closer together and acquired a more inclusive
sense of community. Even so, I'm inclined to believe that the average
American still associates a sense of place not so much with architecture
or a monument or a designed space as with some event, some daily or
weekly or seasonal occurrence which we look forward to or remember
and which we share with others, and as a result the event becomes more
significant than the place itself. Moreover, I believe that this has always been the common or vernacular way of recognizing the unique quality of the community we live in. The Old World farm village came to life whenever it observed the traditional farm calendar or the church calendar. The special days for plowing, for planting, for harvesting, the days set aside for honoring the local saint, were days when the local sense of place was most vivid. What made the marketplace significant was not its architecture, it was the event which took place there, the recurring day. It would be worth studying how special places have been abandoned over time, and how the event itself has been relocated.

Modern America, of course, has abandoned most of that traditional calendar. But to take its place we continue to evolve, in town after town, a complicated schedule of our own. What brings us together with people is not that we live near each other, but that we share the same timetable: the same work hours, the same religious observances, the same habits and customs. That is why we are more and more aware of time, and of the rhythm of the community. It is our sense of time, our sense of ritual, which in the long run creates our sense of place, and of community. In our urban environment which is constantly undergoing irreversible changes, a cyclical sense of time, the regular recurrence of events and celebrations, is what gives us reassurance and a sense of unity and continuity.

A remarkable book entitled *Hidden Rhythms* by Eviatar Zerubavel, published in 1981, is a pioneer treatment of what the author describes as the sociology of time: “the *sociotemporal order* which regulates the lives of *social* entities such as families, professional groups, religious communities, complex organizations, or even entire nations.” Zerubavel writes that “much of our social life is temporally structured in accordance with ‘mechanical time,’ which is quite independent of the rhythm of man’s organic impulses and needs.” In other words, we are increasingly detaching ourselves from ‘organic and functional periodicity’ which is dictated by nature, and replacing it by ‘mechanical periodicity’ which is dictated by the schedule, the calendar, and the clock.”

There is no need to dwell on the ever-increasing importance of mechanical time in modern America with our insistence on schedules, programs, timetables, and the automatic recurrence of events—not only in the workplace but in social life and celebrations. Nor need we be reminded that this reverence for the clock and the calendar has robbed much social intercourse of its spontaneity and has in fact relegated place and the sense of place to a subordinate position in our lives. Much has been written (notably by Ervin Goffman and Joshua Meyrowitz) about the disappearance of spatial distinctions and spatial characteristics because of the electronic media. In terms of the High Plains, I think it could be said that two factors contributed to an early shift from sense of place to sense of time in the organization of the landscape: the advent of the railroad with its periodicity—a decisive influence in the patterns of social and working contacts in the small railroad towns—and second, the almost total absence of topographical landmarks. Zerubavel, however, goes further in describing the social consequences of this sharing of schedules and calendars and routines, and the consequent downgrading of gathering places:

A temporal order that is commonly shared by a social group and is unique to it [as in a work schedule or holidays or a religious calendar] to the extent that it distinguishes and separates group members from
"outsiders" contributes to the establishment of intergroup boundaries and constitutes a powerful basis of solidarity within the group. ... The private or public quality of any given space very often varies across time. ... By providing some fairly rigid boundaries that segregate the private and public spheres of life from one another ... time seems to function as a segmenting principle; it helps segregate the private and the public spheres of life from one another.²

So in the long run it is that recurrence of certain days, certain seasons that eventually produces those spaces and structures we now think so essential. I believe we attach too much importance to art and architecture in producing an awareness of our belonging to a city or a country, when what we actually share is a sense of time. What we commemorate is its passing; and we thus establish a more universal historical bond and develop a deeper understanding of our society. Let me quote from Paul Tillich:

The power of space is great, and it is always active for creation and destruction. It is the basis of the desire of any group of human beings to have a place of their own, a place which gives them reality, presence, power of living, which feeds them, body and soul. This is the reason for the adoration of earth and soil, not of soil generally but of this special soil, and not of earth generally but of the divine powers connected with this special section of earth. ... But every space is limited, and so the conflict arises between the limited space of any human group, even of mankind itself, and the unlimited claim which follows from the definition of this space. ... Tragedy and injustice belong to the gods of space, historical fulfillment and justice belong to the God who acts in time and through time, uniting the separated spaces of his universe in love.³