

Looking at Landscapes

When geographers look at a particular place or landscape, they look at its spatial organization. Geographers focus on the arrangement and organization of human places via **processes** (or activities) within those areas. The type of activity at that place is important. Is the activity's focus political, environmental, economic, cultural, historical, etc.? All positive and negative human activities on any landscape create various unique **patterns**. Where these processes and patterns take place are important also... is it an urban, suburban or rural setting? Geographers also concern themselves with size or **scale**... Is it a large or small region or area that captures our interest?

Spacing is another key concept for understanding any landscape. Density, concentration and pattern represent how space is used. **Density** is the number of items in a particular area, **concentration** depicts how spread out or close together things are, and **pattern** is the geometric arrangement of items. All three of these spatial attributes are important within a particular place, helping to further describe it.

For study purposes, by creating large or small regions (areas), geographers can look closely at unique topics or issues within that place. Using Geographic observations, we can "read" those areas of interest or what geographers call "landscapes". In other words, what is the "look" of a particular place or its "**landscape signature**". What is its focus or essence? What is important and unique to that place? To help in the understanding of activities within various places and how those interactions shape any landscape, the Six Elements with the Eighteen Standards* are essential, providing a framework for your observations. Geographers always ask why is this place here? What makes it unique? Using the geographic standards and elements will help clarify these basic questions.

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D.W. Meinig

- "Environment sustains us as creatures; landscape displays us as culture; landscape is defined by our vision as interpreted by our minds."
- You can read a landscape in the same way you read a book.
- Landscapes are a blend of past and current, folk and pop cultural influences.
- Landscapes are contradictory and confusing and yet homogenous and constant in many ways. They evolve.
- Focus on the signature or essence (tastes, values, aspirations, activities, opportunities and fears in tangible, visible forms.)

In the following pages, you will be introduced to Pierce Lewis' Seven Axioms as a guide on what to look for when reading various landscapes. Also, you will be looking at D.W. Meinig's Ten Landscapes when focusing on what the "signature" or essence should be within any particular area or region. Enjoy this brief introduction to landscape studies. With your *Geography for Life* (GFL) book and this packet, you'll be able to start "Landscape Interpretation."

Pierce F. Lewis: "Axioms for Reading the Landscape" (Modified)

1. Landscape as a clue to culture

It is generally accepted that:

- Man-made landscapes provide the evidence of who we are and who we are becoming.
- "Everyday" regional landscape change reflects eventually national culture change simultaneously.
- If one region looks substantially different from another, the region will vary both ecologically and culturally.
- When two areas look more and more alike, then ideas and cultures are converging.
- Diffusion leads to landscape change by imitation and communication.
- Tastes (fads) exhibit likes and dislikes plus promote or prohibit actions. Different cultures embrace different tastes (day to day behavior).

2. Landscapes as unity and equality

It is generally accepted that:

- All items in human landscapes without exception reflect that culture, no matter how seemingly important or not. McDonalds is just as important as "the mall" in Washington, D.C. (both vernacular and traditional elements are important).
- There is no such thing as a culturally uninteresting landscape.

3. Landscapes of common things

It is generally accepted that:

- Common landscapes are difficult to access; you must be a detective looking for other than aesthetic artifacts (certain parts of town, places that are common but unique to the landscape; architecture, colors, use of space, smells, etc).
- The written and spoken word, formal, informal, advertised, promotional, unconventional, all are important.

4. The historic landscape

It is generally accepted that:

- "Doings" and "markings" on both the physical and human landscape (positive or negative) of past events put things in cultural context.
- Types of and changes in technology and communication are important for understanding a particular landscape.

5. Landscape location

It is generally accepted that:

- It is important to study the cultural landscape within a geographic context (nothing is unrelated to its surroundings..."the why" of a landscape).
- Both physical and cultural surroundings (site and situation) influence perception and interpretation.

6. Landscape are intimate with their physical environment

It is generally accepted that:

- Knowledge of the physical landscape is necessary (climate, landforms, soils, etc. and their integrative nature are important). Understanding the ecological forces that shape and change that landscape must be considered.

7. Landscapes can be obscure

It is generally accepted that:

- One must ask questions (What does it look like? How does it work? Who designed it? Why? When? What does it tell us about these people?).
- Landscapes carry many meanings; it is important to communicate multiple "open-ended" landscape observations.
- The landscape means different things to different people (insiders and outsiders).

D.W. Meinig: Landscape Interpretations (Modified)

What is the focus or "signature" of a particular place or landscape?
(Which of these best describes "your" landscape?)

1. Landscape as nature

- Nature is dominant; conservationist view, preserved, pristine
- Culture is considered an invasion, sometimes reactionary, confrontational
- Grassroots environmental movements, parks, wildlife, etc. are important
- Nurturing and protecting the environment is necessary

2. Landscape as habitat

- To domesticate, to alter for productivity in harmony with nature
- Nature is viewed as the provider, landscape is converted into resources and materials
- Desire to be a land steward, manage to maintain bounty, efficient and self sustaining
- Quality of life relative to healthy natural habitat is important
- Nature is a kind, gentle provider if respected (many developing countries practice this, also some developed countries)

3. Landscape as artifact

- Natural landscape is just a stage; landscape created by people, creating imprints, creating a cultural drama
- Man made emphasis, soils, waterways, etc., nature is conquered and reshaped and controlled
- Technology dominates, short term, ego driven, "technology will cure all" attitude

4. Landscape as a system

- Holistic: landscape is a system with integrative subsystems
- Humans and nature are expressions of a systemic 'oneness'
- Landscape is not isolated with human activity, it strives to integrate and promote cultural landscapes that function and "blend in" with landscape forces
- Designs and activities maximize and recognize environmental-ecological systems

5. Landscape as problem

- Landscape needs corrections and is problematic: ozone depletion, pollution, urban crime, sprawl, congestion, decline, other issues, etc.
- Landscape as habitat, artifact and system are all in disarray
- Manifests itself in "alarm approach-bandage" or problem solving only corrections
- Short term approaches mostly, however long term approaches and practices could be emerging

6. Landscape as wealth

- People own the land; economic worth is foremost, especially in the marketplace
- Factors include physical characteristics, potential development, capacity of support systems, site, situation, perceptions and value
- Capitalistic ideology—sometimes exploits carrying capacity and sustainability of landscape (resource driven)

7. Landscape as ideology

- Symbolic: values, ideals, aspirations, cultural hopes and dreams are reflected strongly
- Underlying consciousness, philosophies and self-perceptions
- Personality, has a very pronounced landscape signature; single positive or integrative ideology, or over stimulating, repressive, chaotic and unhealthy focus

8. Landscape as history

- Locational documentation of human and physical landscape, put in chronological content
- Patterns, forms, styles, details, etc. are positioned in time and sequence with linkages to past and sometimes future activities, events and behaviors
- Relates to culture, various subcultures and individuals involved in temporal event(s) on a particular landscape, the emphasis is on who we are and how we came to be

9. Landscape as place

- Establishes a sensual gestalt ambiance: inputs include sounds, smells, psychological feel, flavor, spirituality concentrating on uniqueness
- Concentrates of landscape character and phenomena, visually coherent, exciting and sensually rewarding (Venice, Vatican City, Hollywood, etc.), in relationship with cultural interactions

10. Landscapes as aesthetic

- Emphasis on artistic quality, the landscape focus is on a visual scene
- Line, form, color, texture, proportion, tension, unity are being strongly communicated: could synergize with history and place but still aesthetically focused
- Landscape is seen as primarily an object; the function and cultural meaning are of little importance
- Examples of both physical (e.g. Grand Canyon) and human (e.g. some architectural or artistic phenomenon)

"Looking at Everyday (and Other) Landscapes"

("Stuff" to think about when observing a particular place)

Accessibility- local neighborhood accessibility to goods & services

Architecture- type, extent, preservation, etc.

Art- type, extent, community focus, etc.

Attractions-tourist, cultural, etc.

Balance of neighborhood activities

Basic/Non-basic Sectors- export or local

Building Use and Focus- public, private, historic, corporate, retail, wholesale, industrial, professional, entertainment, tourist, residential (projects, apartments, condos, townhouses, etc.), civic, religious, academic, recreational, etc.; also, past and current use, frequency, decay, neglect, abandonment, redevelopment, renewal, age, size, quality, etc.

Civic or Public Spaces-extent, usage, etc.

Connections-with other places, extent, impact, etc.

Concentration- extent or spread of feature, dispersed or clustered

Cooperation and Conflict-visible or spoken

Core- dominate area

Corridors- transportation to and from significant places and landmarks

Cultural Focal Points

Demographics- population growth/decay patterns

Density- frequency of phenomenon, number of items per unit

Domain- area of influence

Economic Focus- primary, secondary, tertiary, basic, non-basic activities

Edges or Boundaries

Ethnicity/Immigrant Populations

Environmental issues concerns, etc.

Foods-ethnic, local, cultural, popular, etc.

Gentrification-urban morphology

Green space- parks, play areas, squares, gardens, landscaping

Historic Preservation-visible, extent, spoken, etc.

History- past, present, future

Infrastructure

International Influences/Connections

Junk-Waste management

Landmarks-Symbols, signage, icons, etc.

Looks- neighborhood attractiveness, order, layout, the "feel", lighting, patterns, wealth, poverty, etc.

Markets- products, sales, retail, exports, etc.

Markings- signage, gang related, colors, etc.

Medical- hospitals, clinics, focus, extent, etc.

Mobility- connections with other neighborhoods or areas, cities, etc.

Morphology- changes (past to present)

Music- focus, ethnic, cultural, etc.

Neighborhood Centers-focal points, activities

Neighborhoods- types organization, rural, patterns (again, the "feel") gated, suburban, urban-congested.

Community priorities and issues

Pattern- geometric distribution, streets, infrastructure, landscape

People- type (age, gender, activity, density)

Perceptions- insider/outsider

Periphery-surrounding area, importance, impact.

Physical Landscape-attributes, extent, issues, etc.

Police/Safety Presence

Politics- accessibility, bureaucracy, visibility, etc.

Protection of human and physical resources (i.e. rivers, wetlands, historic, environmental, important places)

Push/Pull Factors-positive and negative influences.

Regions- large, small, functional, formal, vernacular

Resources-tangible, non-tangible, etc.

Safety-real and perceived

Scale- micro to macro

Smells

Streets- type/size (drives, alleys, avenues, boulevards, highways), access, bicycle, mass transit, parking, corridors, sidewalks, pedestrian access, etc.

Symbols- *see landmarks*

Technology- usage, prevalence, infrastructure, examples

Toponymy- place names (descriptive, commemorative, people, places, landmarks, etc.)

Tourism-visual clues, activities, focus, etc.

Transportation- transit focus (*see streets*)

Urbanization- issues, extent as opposed to rural areas

Valued Community Focus- activities, areas, buildings, its "signature"

Water management and related issues

Zones of Transition- from one area/region to another, borders, marked, unmarked.

Zoning Practices- building and other usage.