Bigger, Better, More: American Myths and the Built Landscape of the West

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Any investigation into how the built landscape of the West might have gotten to be the unique thing that it is inevitably leads one into dangerous territory. That territory is the anxious morass of revisionist histories advanced in the academic circles of historians of America. For my purposes here, I simply decided that each of them had a piece of the truth—and that from these truths, the experiences of my life in the West, and my understandings of how culture and architecture operate, I would make my own story. This is a story of a connection between the powerful history of the West, the mythology it generated, and, in turn, how cities and towns perhaps came to be as a result. It is also a story that must leave out some of other truths in order to make its telling more succinct. I leave out, among other things, the systematic brutality in the conquering of Native American peoples, the already existing Hispanic culture of California and the Southwest, and the curious artifact of San Francisco, founded early on in a leapfrog fashion by sea rather than by land.

The idea that the territory to the West was a land of potential wealth and unfettered opportunity is embedded in the American psyche. European settlers came West to the shores of North America. From there they pushed inevitably West. The West provided the promise of immense resources to a young nation. This was the West of "manifest destiny". On January 12, 1788, James Madison wrote in The Federalist, Number 38,

> "...It is now no longer a point of speculation and hope that the Western territory is a mine of vast wealth to the United States, ... must it hereafter be able under proper management both to effect the gradual discharge of the domestic debt, and to furnish for a certain period, liberal tributes to the Federal Treasury. A very large portion of this fund has been already surrendered by individual States; and it may with reason be expected, that the remaining States will not persist in withholding similar proofs of their equity and generosity. We may calculate therefore that a rich and fertile country, of an area equal to the inhabited extent of the United States, will soon become national stock. Congress have assumed the administration of this stock. They have begun to render it productive..."[1]

DESCRIBING AND DEPICTING THE WEST

Only fourteen years later, in 1802, the Lewis and Clark expedition set out. Their work began what would be a seventy year attempt by white Americans to map and understand the landscape between St. Louis and San Francisco. But the land and its inhabitants proved to be not easily mapped, described, or understood. This was not due to inherent difficulty of the place, itself, but rather to the experience of the observers and the paucity of their existing language to portray newness. It almost goes without saying that the vast deserts of the Southwest were the last place in the West to be appreciated as beautiful by Americans of European descent.

It is perhaps important to reiterate the double-world the wilderness represented for these people. On one hand it was Thoureau's paradise; the peaceful, unspoiled place on earth where human beings were their best. On the other hand it was the howling uncivilized void where all manner of fearful things dwelt and where human beings were reduced to savagry to survive. The vastness of the West was the Wilderness in no uncertain terms. As we will see, the push westward only confirmed this duality, though it became much more specific.[2]

The white Americans sent to explore and survey the land of the West had no language with which to describe what they were seeing. They tried all sorts of techniques of description. John Charles Fremont, on his first expedition in 1842, found the romantic and scientific language of European landscape description worked to describe the Great Plains, though its scale and endless horizons had no comparisons in those descriptive traditions. When Fremont got to the Rockies, however, he was, literally, at a loss for words. He wrote, "Though these snow mountains are no the Alps, they have their own character of grandeur and magnificence, and will doubtless find pens and pencils to do them justice." And, so, he left it to others to try to come up with a language for this

landscape. He resorted to describing what the landscape was not. Finally, passing over the Rockies into the Great Basin, he was, apparently, overwhelmed. He wrote comparatively little about this vast stretch of land, finding it too harsh, too barren, and too strange to describe: "in America", he wrote, "such things are new and strange, unknown and unsuspected".[3]

Fremont was not the only observer of the West at a loss for words. Francis Parkman, Harvard educated to the tastes of Europe, found during his travels to the West in 1848-9 that the Great Plains "had not one picturesque or beautiful feature, nor had it any features of grandeur, othan than its vast extent, its solitude, and its wildness". Of the high plains of Wyoming he wrote, "If a curse had been placed on the land, it could not have worn a more dreary and forlorn barrenness."[4] Others were similarly confounded by the West. It would take a full generation or two before a technique of description—one appropriate to the place and not connected to a European tradition—could be found.

In the meantime, this crisis of description was partially resolved by the emergence of a body of landscape etchings and paintings that attempted to record the landscape of the West. Many of the early drawings and etchings were made by artists who accompanied exploration and survey parties. Even these artists had a hard time at first, for their eyes and their hands were trained in a tradition of landscape rendering that was picturesque with lush vegetation and hazy, receding edges. The landscape of the West, with its vast scale, harsh light, strange forms, brilliantly colored earth, sparse vegetation, and deep shadows was as strange to their pencils and brushes as it was to the pens of their literary counterparts. Eventually, however, the sublime emerged as a central theme in the work, and these painters became key interpreters of the West for East Coast Americans and Europeans.[5]

By the late 1860's photography came along to assist further in the description. By that time, exploratory expeditions took along photographers and their extensive silver plate equipment. These photographs captured a sort of "truth" about the shapes and sharp edges of the landscape, but the profound color of earth could not be conveyed in black and white. As the catalog for an exhibition of daguerreotypes of the mountains of California put it, "these views are no exaggerated and high-colored sketches, got up to produce effect, but are as every daguerroeotype must be, the stereotyped impression of the real thing. These photographs revealed that the landscape was, in fact, like nothing understood previously. It was, indeed, vast, unmarked, strange, sparsely vegetated, and wild beyond imagination.[6]

Finally, in the 1870's, Clarence Dutton, who accompanied John Wesley Powell on his second expedition down the Colorado, discovered how to desrcibe the Western landscape in words. He chose straightforward description, mixed with scientific observation, and sprinkled with some non-landscape analogy. For instance, the walls of the Grand Canyon "rambles in and out" and has "angles that are acute and descend as sharp spurs like the forward edge of a plowshare."[7] These methods of description proved useful and established a vocabulary based upon a new way of seeing the landscape. Finally, white Americans began to SEE the place in its own terms—terms free of European and East Coast associations.

On May 10, 1869, the final spike was driven into the Transcontinental railroad. This act was the symbolic end of the age of exploration of the West, and signaled the acceleration of the selling and settling of it.

SELLING THE WEST

In spite of the ambivalance they felt toward the unfamiliar landscape, anglo Americans and Europeans alike had developed a huge interest in the West. This interest was encouraged and supported by both the Federal government and private entrepenuers. The goal of the promotion was both political and economic, and took many forms.

The focus of the curiousity seemed to vary according to education and class. The educated upper classes found the West a curiousity, full of colorful Indians, bizarre landscapes, and harsh traveling conditions. They bought paintings of the landscape, which were often toned down for the tastes of the day. They read books, sometimes written by men, like James Fenimore Cooper, who had never set foot west of the Mississippi, or women, like Caroline Kirkland, who settled the prairie and told the truth of its hardships. They almost demanded magazine and news articles written by newspaper reporters from the East who accompanied exploration parties. And, not surprisingly, they enthusiastically sponsored continued exploration and subjugation of the West.

The lower classes in America, however, found something different in the news of the West. They found opportunity. The promises of land, wealth, and freedom from the class-bound society of the East coast canceled out the warnings of the hardships and dangers. While the upper classes became tourists (often in their armchairs), the lower classes settled the West. The generousity and abundance of the West drew them—and has remained firmly embedded in the mythos of the place.

As I have said, there were many vehicles for information about the West. Some of it was true, and some of it was false, but almost all of it was interesting. Perhaps the primary source of information was the print media: books, official exploration reports, and magazine and newspaper articles. *Harper's Monthly* had a circulation in the mid-ninteenth century of over 200,000. It frequently carried articles and etchings about the West to all of those subscribers.[8] The completion of the railroad greatly increased the access reporters had to the West—though in a curiously narrow way. The tracks ran along the 41st parallel, making it the most described corridors of landscape ever published. From the relative comfort and safety of the rail car, the reporters and their artists and photographers moved with previously unknown speed across the landscape.[9]

Exhibitions of etchings, paintings , and photographs were sponsored by the government and by private interests, including the railroad. These exhibitions recieved widespread attention both in the United States and in Europe. Paintings and etchings of Native Americans and their lives were of immense interest, especially in Europe. These paintings carried both fear and fascination, nobility and savagry, as if the people the explorers had found living in the wilderness embodied the essential schizophrenia white Amercians felt for the landscape itself. Among the things these images achieved was the establishment of the mythic scale of the West in the Amercian psyche.[10]

One particularly popular form of presentation of the West was the "Pantoscope". This invention of the 1840's came from Europe and consisted of an enormously long canvas painting . The painting was moved, scene by scene, by the audience on giant rollers. Early in the use of Pantographs American painters made panoramas of riverboat trips down the Mississippi. In the early 1850's the Gold Rush and the Overland Trail became favorite subjects. Enterprising artists crossed the country on the trail, sketching and painting what they saw, then transferring the whole onto a giant panorama. The landscape, of course, was not in proportion to its size, with the empty Great Basin whizzing by with a few bleak comments from the narrator.[11]

By 1859, stereoscopic photographs had also become quite the rage. Almost every household in the East had one. Stereographs of the West were extremely popular and served to further disseminate images of the landscape, its people, and the life of the explorers and settlers. In 1862, Carleton Watkins mounted a very popular exhibition of photographs of Yosemite. It was received with enthusiasm and some disbelief.[12]

The completion of the railroad also allowed for a flourishing tourist industry, complete with guidebooks, illustrated lectures, and package deals.

By the 1890's, the two American ideas of the wilderness had transformed into two distinct "visions" or attitudes toward the West. One was articulated and nurtured in an academic setting. The other reigned in popular culture.

Frederick Jackson Turner, was an academic historian whose characterization of the West was of a benign, free, and uninhabited land. His writings and lectures set the historical framing of Westward expansion used for the next one hundred years. At a lecture at the Columbia Exposition in 1893 he summarized the American experience of settling the West as "a regenerative retreat to the primitive, followed by a recapitulation of the stages of civilization." He said, "In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated , and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality or characteristics."[13] This peaceful process was a noble, at most challenging, endeavor. Here was Thoreau's paradise, an Amercian paradise. Here, too, was the abundance the myth promised.

By stark contrast, was "Buffalo Bill" Cody. His Wild West extravaganzas portrayed to the public the West as a harsh land where men had to be bold, independent, and ruthless as they confronted the savage Indians and domesticated the wild landscape.[14] Here, indeed, was the howling wilderness with its vast, uncontrolled, mythic scale. These shows, begun in the mid-1870's, portrayed the Native Amercians as the agressors and the white men as victims. The most famous of the "historical re-enactments" Buffalo Bill performed was Custer's Last Stand. It is hard not to imagine that the shows drummed up the popular support needed for the final defeat of the Sioux, the Comanche, the Apache, and the Cheyenne.

And so the West was packaged and sold to Amercians and Europeans. One of the primary goals of this sell-job was to bring people to the West, to wrest it forever from the Native Amercians, to tame it, and to render it productive. Simultaneously the lasting myths of the West were born: free and unlimited land, golden opportunity, an unfettered life, and rewards for the independent, tough, individual.

SETTLING THE WEST

These histories and myths, along with others, coincided to give form to the settlement of the far West (loosely defined as the landscape from the arid Western edge of Kansas to the Pacific side of the Sierra Nevada). In the West there is not really a duality between urban and rural. This duality is a European idea based upon a world where urban life came to represent manufacture and industry, and where rural life came to represent agriculture. It is based upon a world where cities were first walled castles that offered protection from maurauders and foreign soldiers. It is based upon a world where cities grew up after the farms, where agricultural land is rich and densely settled and worked, and where, in the past, over half the population of any given area was not in the cities. None of these are applicable to the West.

The settling of the West was done strategically. The vast expanse from St. Louis to San Francisco, was first used by white Americans in two ways. First by transcient trappers and hunters (and, later, miners and ranchers) who moved through the region exploiting its resources. The second use was as a transportation corridor connecting East to the promised land of California. The traffic on the Overland and Santa Fe Trails grew dramatically during the California Gold Rush after 1849, and again after the completion in 1869 of the Trans-continental, and a short time later, the Santa Fe, railroads. Very few people stayed in the region. Those that did, however, mostly stayed to help those that were passing through.

Once the Native Americans were mostly subdued, the towns were not in need of built protections. The form they took was along the transportation they served. The single Main Street simply trickled out at its ends, only to to be added to upon demand. The edge of town was a constantly moving thing. The boundary between town and not-town became less and less abrupt as these towns were settled. Almost anybody could stay.

It was in thes ways that the towns and cities of the West happened. They were service towns. And they came *before* the settled rural populations. Most were located along lines of transportation and provided goods to restock travelers, lodging, fresh draught animals, and news about the trail beyond. Others were gathering-in points for the resources like gold, silver, and furs gotten from the land. Later on it would be sheep and cattle, coal and uranium. The miner, trappers, and ranchers would get fresh supplies, then return to the empty land to continue their trades. Some towns, in addition, served tourists, and later resorts. All of these towns were oases of sorts; a place of civilization and safety in a largely unpredictable and empty landscape. There was no pastoral countryside.[15] The industry of the West, its productive capacity, happened outside the towns at mines and ranches.

The operative myths became, of course, self-fulfilling. The people who came to the West were there mostly to seek their fortune. They were generally independent sorts, attracted to the wide horizons and the freedoms they represented. The move West had already required them to pull up their roots. They were transcient almost by definition, moving where the opportunity seemed best. This tendancy was only furthered by the boom-and-bust nature of many enterprises in the West. A town would appear almost overnight to serve a large mine, only to as quickly become a ghost-town when the ore was gone. The West became a place of sudden community, instant culture, and constant goodbyes. It also became a place of dashed hopes and broken dreams. There is something deeply sad about a deserted town. It is the embodiment of the myth of scale overcoming the myth of abundance.

By the 1920's most of the landscape of the West had been surveyed, recorded, accessed, and photographed. It was no longer a land of the unknown. In some ways it seemed that the old West had been civilized like the East. But everyone knew better. The myths of the West became defining myths for the nation. These myths were further embedded in the culture by the ultimate myth-maker of all time: the movie. Cowboy movies continued the myths articulated by Cody and spread them world-wide. The Italians became so enamoured of them that they made the "spaghetti" westerns. Aside from all the macho qualities a cowboy has, he is an independent rover, going where his fortunes take him, heedless of family or emotional ties.

The Western towns that survived continued in the way that they began. They continued to provide services to a largely mobile population. They continued to gather up the resources pulled from the land. They grew in sudden spurts along with the fortunes of their inhabitants. They were unemcumbered by traditionally held farm land on their edges, so land was cheap. Thre was no need to grow up, when growing out was so easy. Their form began to take on a curious combination of urban and rural ideals: pieces of land with houses set in the middle.

The addition of the automobile to this culture made perfect sense. It adapted itself quite easily to towns based upon transportation. It allowed for more mobility, greater independence, and more room for everybody. People in the West were used to the vast distances between things. The car simply made this dispersed life more convenient. The uncannily predictive dream of Frank Lloyd Wright for Broadacre City captured it all. It is interesting, and perhaps disturbing, to note the similarity between Wright's dream and, for instance, contemporary Phoenix.

The point of all this is to say that the sprawling, auto-oriented city of the far West is not some poor, deformed cousin of Eastern cities. Like the landscape of the West was to the early explorers, it is something wholly new. It is of its own place and time. It is a result of its unique histories and myths. It must be accepted on its own terms. It is not about rural and urban. It is not about European ideals of plazas and quarters. It is not about rooted hierarchical culture. And as with the landscape of the West, we need to invent new ways to describe the Western city. In the end it has to be seen with new eyes to be appreciated, for it is still about a place for those trying to make their fortune in a vast, difficult, opportunity laden landscape.

NOTES

1. Madison
2. Huth, Moncrief, Santmire, White
3. Hyde, pg. 5
4. Hyde, pg 41
5. Hyde, Novak (as general sources on this topic)
6. Hyde, Jussim, Novak (as general sources on this topic)
7. Hyde, pg. 201
8. Hyde, pg. 70
9. Hyde, Chapter 2 (as overall discussion)
10. Novak (a general source on this topic)
11. Hyde, pgs. 43-47
12. Hyde, pgs. 85-86, Jussim (for general discussion of significance of stereographs)
13. White, Richard, p. 13, Nash, Chapter One (for an overall discussion of significance of Turner to the history of American West.)
14. op. cit., White
15. Nash, Chapter Four (as overall discussion of urbanization of the West)

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