

LEARNING THROUGH LANDSCAPE

*Christopher L. Salter**

You can see with your eyes. You can see with your mind's eye. You can see anew the landscapes that you have known many times before but have not seen. You can see landscapes that you have never even anticipated; and you can see daily scenes that take on new meaning because of new demands you make on your own views. All of these capacities of sight and sense are part of the human potential. All of them relate to landscape; each of them requires vision. Each of them--as is true with all other senses --can afford you learning through landscape.

The mind attempts to organize each vista it encounters. The criteria for such organization are signaled by your own sense of what the function of the view is--what is the purpose of imagining that which is before you? For example, if you are a person in flight from a rabid dog, your views of the landscape will search for certain features such as phone booths, open shops, black and white cars, or even trees. If that same landscape is encountered as you are leading a group of fifth graders to a public park, a wholly different set of responses is created by the same landscape. In this case architecture, names on the stores, even the nature of the music and language that drift out of the open windows will be the image makers.

What is critical is the act of seeing. What is vital is the acknowledging of image--not image as a passive, remote collection of static inputs, but image as the dynamic presence of landscape elements. And it is the creative act of seeing that enlivens the image. We, as geographers, are blessed with the most exciting of educational mediums when we realize how much

*Dr. Salter is Associate Professor of Geography at University of California, Los Angeles. This paper is Dr. Salter's Presidential Address at the Long Beach Meetings, May 1, 1976.

we can learn and teach through an aggressive use of our landscape. All we have to demand of ourselves is that we can see the rich potentials for learning in the field around us.

Think for a minute of another view on seeing. Carlos Castaneda in his Don Juan quartet concludes his ten-year apprenticeship by finally "stopping the world." This act of time withdrawal and self withdrawal is predicated upon one single feat--he (the apprentice) must learn to "see." In the words of Castaneda, this heightened vision meant "responding to the perceptual solicitations of a world outside the description we have learned to call reality." Think of that again, "to respond to perceptual solicitations of a world outside ... reality." This was not a drug vision; it was not even a mystic vision. It was an exhortation to intensify vision through looking harder, with more energy, with more faith at the world of Don Juan. Phrased more simply in another part of the Quartet, it was a requirement to "feel with the eyes." This is seeing.

The questions that we must ask as geographers are two: What are the returns on learning to see landscape; and how shall we educate ourselves and others to gain this vision? Why shall we seek vision: How shall we gain vision?

Let me answer the question of rationale first. There are two basic components to the patterns of people and their progress. One component is the time slice which provides us with blocks of the past to study. History has traditionally used this mode for the cataloguing of man's activities, and all of us have been nurtured on such a segmenting of man's past. The other component of this learning approach is the space slice. By space, I mean the raw material of which our humanized landscapes are created. All landscapes are hosted by space; all space runs the risk of being transformed by society. Space is meant to accommodate our landscape sculptures. In the consideration of the space slice time is, in a sense, disregarded, while we examine the nature of the spatial organization of a given society. For, just as societies have had countless decisions to

make as to how to marshal their time, so too, have there been an infinite number of decisions about how to shape their environment. Geography is the discipline that is most concerned with such patterning of space. It is this facet of our learning demands with which we are most concerned in our comments this evening.

*Five Geographic Themes Leading to
Learning Through Landscape*

Whether or not a person has had any training in geography the discipline can make available to him five fundamental themes which are helpful in the study of society. The themes are:

1. Space and its characteristics
2. The modification of natural space
3. Changing perceptions of space utility
4. Institutions created to govern the design of space
5. The social responsibility of the geographer-educator.

To this suite of themes we need add only one question: Is the landscape that we are studying designed in the best interests of its inhabitants? Does it work for them? Will it continue to work for them? How might we as geographers--learning from that landscape--redesign it toward more effective and/or satisfactory space use?

*The First Theme:
Space and Its Characteristics*

There is a subjective and an objective landscape. The subjective landscape relates to environmental perception. The objective landscape is the basic physical reality which a people must deal with as they play out their social, spiritual and survival roles. The conditions of soil, topography, streams, seacoasts and climate are elements of that objective scene. As the set of a stage drama is exposed to the audience for some moments before the players assume their roles, so, too, must a person interested in any specific place and people, give some

preliminary time to quiet and pensive observation of the physical elements of the landscape. This is not to say that these particular qualities force the elaboration of certain cultural patterns, but it is essential to acknowledge the kinds of constraints and benefits a people experience as they attempt to meet needs of food, shelter, clothing, water, and other minimal creature comforts within a given habitat. Just as critical, however, is the institutional matrix each new generation is faced with. It is tradition and not necessity which has us initiate our investigations with consideration of the physical setting.

However, what must be realized in this learning process from the physical environment is that even features as bold as river channels and mountain ranges may be assessed in different ways by different observers. To a nomadic and pastoral people who are compelled, for example, to move their flocks hundreds of miles each year, a river might well be perceived as a frightening component in their environment. To a farming people in the same area, however, the flow of that river might mean the difference between an abundant harvest and famine. At the outset, therefore, it is essential to discuss the landscape and its physical elements in the most objective of terms. What is the relief of the area? What is the annual rainfall, and what is its variability? How long is the growing season? What is the nature of the soils of the region? Even these questions, however, grade into the subjective: How isolated is the region? What crops can be grown there? What flood potential exists as a result of the stream modification done by human groups? How hospitable does the environment seem to be?

If these questions about the spatial characteristics of the objective landscape are considered, asked, and answered as one begins to look at the nature of society in the region, then it will be easier to understand how the people have sculpted a world for themselves in their particular habitat.

*The Second Theme:
Modification of Natural Space*

One of the most immediate human responses to placement in a new setting is to make a mark that is his or her own. Whether one thinks of new curtains in a kitchen, a new arrangement of a homeroom, a new pattern in a garden, or a new logo on a publication, there is a deep-seated call to make one's own mark. On the one hand this modification decision may be described as a functional response to environmental needs, but in virtually every instance of this kind there is also latitude for personal design inputs. The assessment of these facets of individual and idiosyncratic creation is an evocative feature in the analysis of humanized space.

In a broader realm, the decisions people make in regard to settlement patterns, house types, agricultural systems, transportation networks and methods of commercial and industrial organization are all indicators of cultural preferences. It is this individuality which is so expressive of what we must call humanity; it is this same quality of individuality which gives cultural geography so much of its pathos, and it is this tandem quality of cultural uniqueness and individual design that makes the modifications in the creation of a cultural landscape the equivalent of an art form.

This view of landscape as a canvas for the artistic expression of all people is the very quintessence of geographic education. When we view the world around us not as drab acceptance of economic reality, or mute acknowledgement of cultural constraint, but study it rather as individual experiments in popular design, then we have really begun to learn through our landscape. Like the person who is amazed to find out that he has been speaking prose all his life, think of the joy our educational process could bring to a person to whom we say, "You've been creating art all your life in your apartments, your garden plants, your clothes ... and even in your choice of entrees."

We must assign the title of art to this second theme-- this study of the modification of natural space.

The Third Theme:

Changing Perception of Space Utility

As noted above, a river system might be seen as an example of the objective landscape. No one can deny the existence of the channel cut or the seasonal rise and fall of the water level. However, the perception of that landscape feature can change very quickly. If, for example, that river has been a source of anxiety to the surrounding population because of traditional flooding, then it is bound to be evaluated in one way. But, if a significant modification of the stream upriver results in a stable, predictable flow, the response to it may be modified quite rapidly. Examples of features in the landscape which may be subject to rapid changes in perceived utility might include physical features such as marshes that become valuable--or lose value--because of wildlands legislation; coastal mudflats that are enhanced because of the discovery of petroleum; or desert land that suddenly appreciates in value because of zoning changes to allow airport construction.

The roles of technology, economy, and aesthetics are critical to any consideration of this process of valuing. It is the changes in these realms which serve as the catalysts for new resource appraisals. Whether speaking of a primitive people or of the most urbane populations, it is cultural systems which must change to accommodate the use of all but the most fundamental resources. Coal, for example, was long seen as a nuisance before it was accorded high resource value. Hunting and gathering groups place value on plants and earth substances which to other groups would consider using. There are even seasonal changes, or even shorter term changes we experience which have us assign a higher value to tuna and potatoes at the end of the month than at the beginning.

The critical factor to relate to in this theme of varying perception of space and landscape is the theme of change. What our burden as geographers must be is not only perceiving the nature of the change, but comprehending its rationale. What factors have stimulated it? What direction is the change taking? How effective is the change for the society in question?

The Fourth Theme:

*Institutions Created to Govern
the Design of Space*

There is nothing innovative about pointing out the fickle nature of man in his romance with space and place. Such an observation is in that class of verities which lead one to say, "Yes ... yes, of course. I've known that all along, although I may not have said it just that way." This theme then, is a continuation of the third theme above--the concept of changing perception. Not only do societies change their views on the value of certain space and space modifications, they create institutions to organize and direct such modifications. The shaman, for example, is exhorted to create sacred space. City councils have the power to limit new housing starts. State legislatures may cause whole cities to bloom in the desert simply because of the allowance of gambling. The examples are without limit. Each society which acknowledges its own ability to shape space creates social organizations to oversee the shaping and use of that very space.

The role of the geographer in considering this cultural phenomenon is to ask questions about who is given authority to design landscapes. What status is given to the people who have the power to assign the title of "private" to plots; to designate ceremonial foods? to give certain season to certain acts of landscape modification? In every case the geographer--the explorer of landscape--is trying to understand the morphology, the genesis, and the evolution of such patterns of space.

The final question to be asked about particular landscapes and the people who transform them is, "is this a productive use of space for this population?" If we can learn not only how space is transformed, but also how well present configurations mesh with the social needs of the population under scrutiny, then we have put geography to its best uses. And in this process we have learned that much more about the basic nature of humankind. This final theme is, then, . . .

The Fifth Theme:

*The Social Responsibility of
the Geographer-Educator*

It will not do for us to be satisfied with mere academic inventory-taking of this process of landscape development. The speed with which new vistas are being created requires that the body of decision-makers be enlarged. Changes are carried out on such a large scale that there is a real need to acquaint more people with the potential influence and responsibility they possess for the shape of the world around them.

Geographers--who traditionally have withdrawn from any social use of their discipline--must educate students and public alike in the process of landscape evaluation and consequent civic participation. If the web of freeway interchanges, for example, is offensive, thought must be given to analysis of the alternatives in an urban transport network. Speculation as to the probable impact of a policy of freeway elimination will illustrate what other ramifications such an act would have. Are such alternatives superior? For whom? And what are the means of influencing the policy-makers? Where does the decision-making power lie?

Or, consider the termination of the development of tract housing. What social costs are there to be paid if large scale housing developers are disallowed within or on the margins of urban areas? What will this mean for patterns of home ownership, settlement, maintenance of older communities? The

answering of these, and similar questions, should lead all of us to realize that geography is an absolute keystone in the process of liberal education at any level. While landscape may be the focus of our syllabus, we can see that the critical process of culture development and social interaction and the vehicles, the dynamic elements, of this creation of the humanized earth. It is our responsibility to make sure that our students see this just as clearly.

To conclude, therefore, reflect on these geographic themes:

- ... space and its characteristics
- ... the modification of natural space
- ... changing perception of space utility
- ... institutions created to govern the design of space
- ... the social responsibility of the geographer-educator

The study of these phenomena is the study of humankind. And the locus for this study is the landscape. Let us, the practitioners of the single discipline which grants the landscape the vitality it truly possesses, give energy and creativity to the act of learning through landscape.

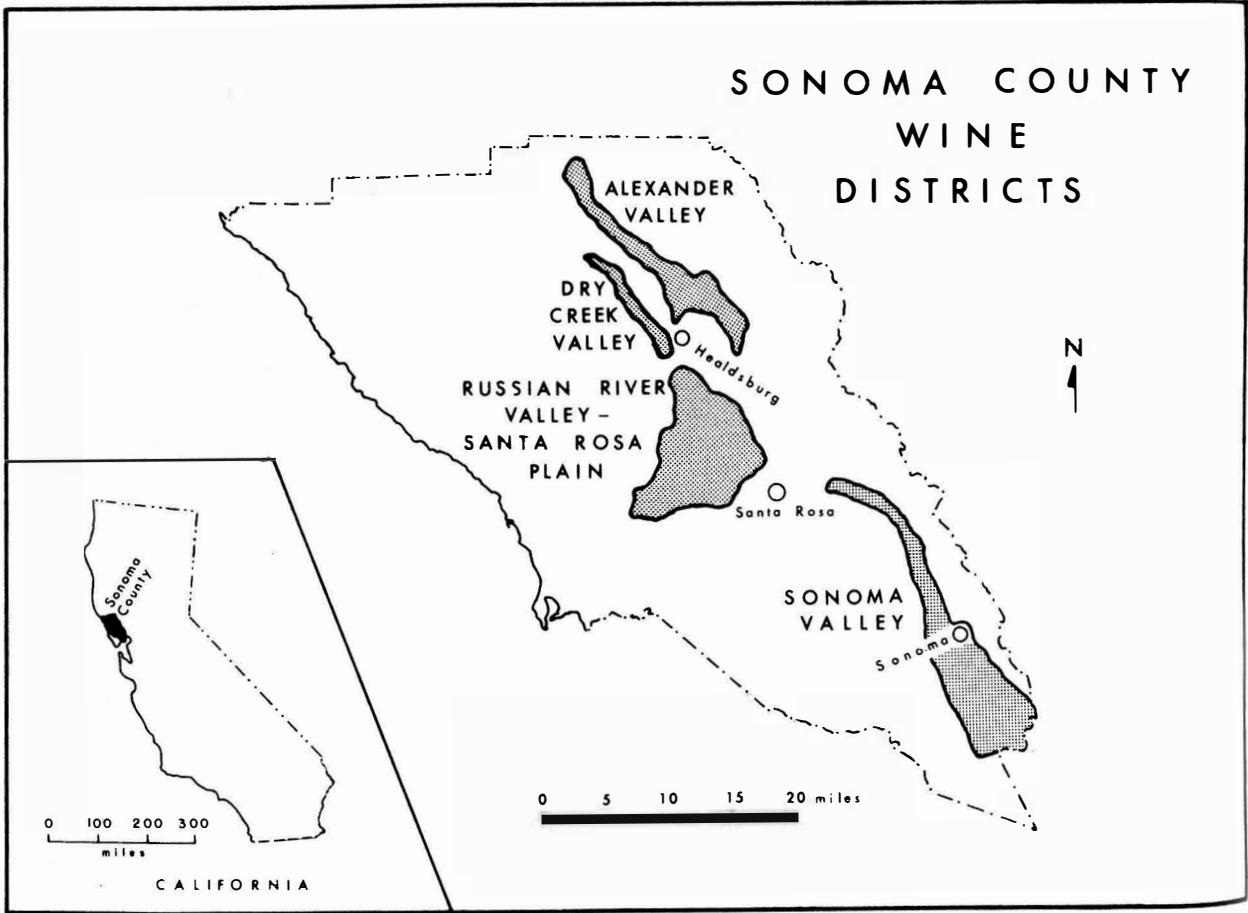


Figure 1. The California North Coast Wine Grape Region Showing Sonoma County.