



SUMMER HOME SETTINGS AS CULTURAL LANDSCAPES: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA IN THE 1930'S

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The cultural and economic geography of Southern California changed rapidly in the 1920's and 1930's. This not only produced tremendous transformations within the region itself, but also increasingly propelled Southern California into national prominence. As Southern California's rôle in the American economy grew, so did its influence upon the broader lineaments of American culture. Wilbur Zelinsky speculates that it became "a super-American region or the outpost of a rapidly approaching post industrial future."¹ James Vance acknowledges that California's "cultural dynamics will foretell the social geography of us all in the near future."² D. W. Meinig declares the area a "major culture hearth" and the "chief source-region of a new American life-style."³

This article analyzes a selective slice of this rapidly changing Southern California society. In order to assess the landscape tastes of the region's newly-emerging elite, it focuses on the summer home preferences of this small group during the 1930's. Its relatively small size notwithstanding, this group is important because their affluence gave them the power to reshape the landscapes of many communities within the region and, therefore, to

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create and to amplify regional landscape features which were destined to diffuse across the larger American scene. If, as Peirce Lewis states, landscape is a "clue to culture," then the summer home settings shaped by these select Southern Californians act as clues to the dynamic culture of the region.⁴ In succession, the paper (1) describes the geography of summer home preferences of a number of elite residents in the region, (2) discusses location factors which account for the distribution of summer homes, and (3) identifies three particularly significant features of these summer environments which are used to define elements of the distinctive character of the region's overall cultural geography.

Data Sources and Background

The 1939 *Los Angeles Blue Book*, a social register of local elite, can be used to collect data on summer home environments.⁵ For each of the 2,742 entries in the directory, information is provided on home address, head of household, names of other family members, telephone numbers, memberships in local clubs and social organizations, and the addresses of seasonal homes (if any). About 15 percent of all the entries in the *Blue Book* (432 entries) list summer home addresses. Of these 432 cases, fifteen have been omitted because of insufficient information describing their location. The remaining 417 cases list identifiable summer home locations and constitute the focus of this study. Though few in number, members of this group were much more likely to possess a second home than were members of other socioeconomic groups; and, as local elite, they often played key rôles in actually shaping the cultural landscapes of certain preferred communities and in diffusing their preferences to the population as a whole.

Seasonal recreation and summer home developments certainly did not originate in Southern California. In the early 1700's the habit of either maintaining a second home or travelling to seasonal resorts for health and pleasure spread through the middle and upper levels of English

society.⁶ Even colonial America was not without seasonal resorts where it was fashionable to "take the waters" and hob nob with others in the budding colonial aristocracy.⁷ During the nineteenth century, full-fledged summer resorts flowered in the eastern United States. Mineral spas lured those with aching bones to havens such as Saratoga Springs; sea bathing, boating, and fishing drew others to Bar Harbor, Newport, Long Island, and Atlantic City; and the rustic joys of mountain retreats attracted still others to the Catskills, Adirondacks, or Berkshires.⁸

In this century, ever greater numbers of the expanding American middle class have had the time and money to join the elite in seasonal second home settings. Accordingly, vacation housing has been increasingly recognized for its significant economic impact in many communities; and the location factors affecting the geography of vacation housing have come under increasing scrutiny. For example, in a discussion of the environmental factors that shape contemporary, recreationally-oriented "voluntary" regions, Zelinsky notes that individuals are attracted to amphibious (water-oriented), heliotropic (sun-seeking), montane, and equine environments.⁹ Ragatz also suggests the importance of outdoor recreational amenities, but finds as well that distance between permanent and seasonal residence is a key variable.¹⁰ Additional empirical work by Bell and Tombaugh parallels the findings of Ragatz by citing the rôle which distance and accessibility play in the creation of summer home communities.¹¹

Clearly, one key variable shaping the appearance and number of summer homes was the rising affluence of an elite population. In particular, Southern California witnessed a great deal of rapid economic growth in the 1920's, which accelerated the creation of summer home environments in the region. Between 1920 and 1924, Los Angeles alone gained over 100,000 new residents annually; and this surging population helped to ignite an incredible real estate boom across the region.¹² The 1920's also marked the great years of the oil boom in the Los Angeles Basin, with production exceeding one-half million barrels per

day in 1923.¹³ The motion picture and aircraft industries also grew rapidly during this period. Historian Gerald Nash notes that the twenty years preceding World War II were key decades in the industrial and financial maturation of the region.¹⁴ Undoubtedly, the affluence evident in the *Blue Books* of the 1930's was an outgrowth and an expression of this boom period which began after the First World War. This affluence made possible the proliferation of summer home communities by the end of the interwar period.

The Geography of Summer Homes

In the case of the Southern Californians, their summer home preferences led them to a variety of settings. A majority of the *Blue Book* population (63.5 percent) indicated they wished to get at least fifty miles away from their permanent residences. Yet more than 70 percent, travelled less than 150 miles in moving from permanent to seasonal homes (Table 1). This pattern reflects Tombaugh's finding that approximately 65 percent of the Michigan sample had vacation homes within 200 miles of a primary residence.¹⁵ Since most individuals of both groups were within a day's drive of their seasonal homes, it does seem that relative accessibility was a key variable.

If the area within a 150-mile radius around Los Angeles is defined as a zone of "local summer home settings," three types of destinations—coastal, mountain, and

Table 1. DISTANCE TO SUMMER HOMES, 1939

Miles	Number	Percent of Total
0 - 50	152	36.5
51 - 100	109	25.7
101 - 150	36	8.6
151 - 500	35	8.4
500+	85	20.4

SOURCE: Raymond J. Wolfsohn, ed., *Los Angeles Blue Book, 1939* (Los Angeles: Raymond J. Wolfsohn and William H. Richardson, 1939)

valley/ranch—can be identified as popular choices for accessible seasonal living (Table 2). Settings within three miles of the Pacific were classified as “coastal,” and all of those over 4,000 feet in elevation as “mountain.” The remaining locations, almost all of which were in foothill or interior valley locations, were labeled “valley/ranch” settings.

Most Southern Californians who travelled less than 150 miles to seasonal homes summered on the coast (Figure 1). By far the largest concentration of these coastal migrants was in the Newport-Balboa-Laguna Beach area south of Los Angeles, where more than 100 households spent their summers. Several dozen additional coastal migrants located in a string of resorts south of Laguna from San Clemente to Coronado Island. North and west of Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Montecito, and Malibu proved to be attractive summer home environments; while in the immediate vicinity of the city, others preferred the highly accessible local beaches between Santa Monica and Long Beach.

Southern Californians who spent their summers at interior, mountain settings concentrated primarily around

Table 2. SUMMER HOME ENVIRONMENTS OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIANS, 1939

Setting	Number of Residences	Percent of Total
LOCAL	297	71
Coastal	235	56
Mountain	32	8
Valley/ranch	30	7
NON-LOCAL	120	29
California	35	8
Out-of-state	85	20
TOTAL	417	100

SOURCE: Raymond J. Wolfsohn, ed., *Los Angeles Blue Book, 1939* (Los Angeles: Raymond J. Wolfsohn and William H. Richardson, 1939)

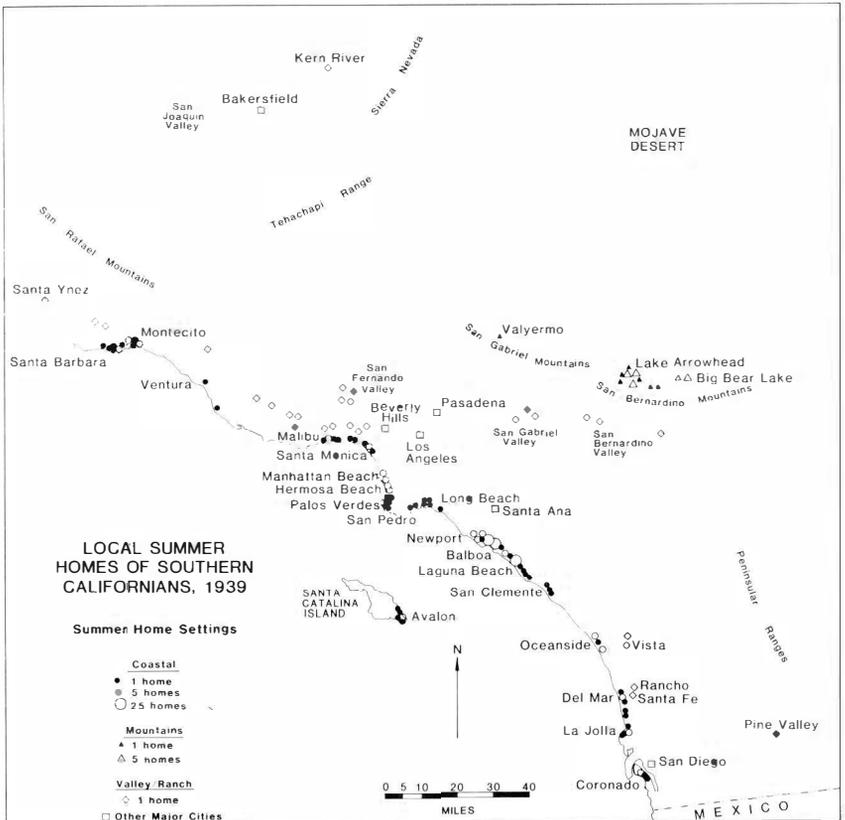


Figure 1. Local summer homes of Southern Californians, 1939. Source: R. J. Wolfsohn, *Los Angeles Blue Book, 1939* (Los Angeles: R. J. Wolfsohn and W. H. Richardson, 1939).

two lakes. Big Bear and Arrowhead, both over 5,000 feet in elevation, were located in the San Bernardino Mountains east of Los Angeles (Figure 1). Valley/ranch settings, were found in the interior valleys and foothills from north of Santa Barbara southward all the way to the Mexican border, and were most widely dispersed across the landscape.

Fewer than 30 percent of summer migrants travelled more than 150 miles to seasonal homes (Table 2). Even so, many of these non-local migrants remained within California (Figure 2). The central coast in the vicinity of

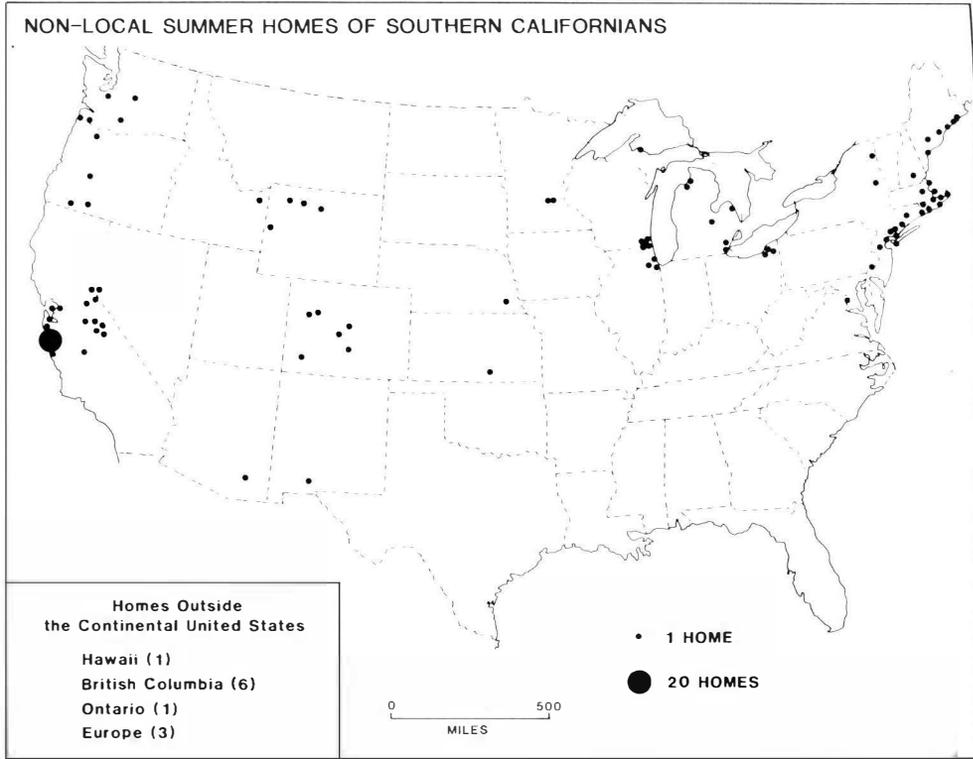


Figure 2. Non-local summer homes of Southern Californians. Source: R. J. Wolfsohn, *Los Angeles Blue Book*, 1939 (Los Angeles: R. J. Wolfsohn and W. H. Richardson, 1939).

Carmel and Monterey, for example, attracted more than twenty migrants; and other clusters of summer homes focused in the High Sierras, from Lake Tahoe to the Yosemite and Mammoth Lakes regions. In the West apart from California, sites were widely scattered, generally rural settings, from central Colorado and northwestern Wyoming to the Pacific Northwest. In the East and Midwest, large cities, such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and New York attracted some migrants. A larger number, however, went to resort settings. Lake Geneva in Wisconsin north of Chicago was popular; and east coast resorts from Bar Harbor, Maine, to Newport, Rhode Island, also attracted a number of prominent Southern Californians. Some even migrated beyond the bounds of the forty-eight states and, in rural as well as urban settings, spent summers in Hawaii, Canada, and Europe.

The Location Factors

No single explanation accounts for the pattern of summer home settings, but several location-specific amenities which served to attract a summer home "elite" are suggested by both the distribution of sites and the types of communities selected. These amenities are grouped into four categories and discussed below.

1. *Environmental Amenities* — Southern Californians were strongly attracted to pleasant, summertime environments. The popularity of coastal and mountain settings suggests a search for relief from the midsummer heat of the Los Angeles Basin. Many of the coastal spots, in particular, were known for their "Mediterranean" charms. From the late nineteenth century through the 1930's, for example, European parallels to Italy and Naples characterized descriptions of Santa Barbara and Montecito.¹⁶ In the promotional literature of the Santa Fe Railroad, Catalina Island was termed the American "Capri"; and others compared its charms to those of the Riviera.¹⁷ The dry summer subtropical climate, an abundance of sunshine, and pleasant temperatures encouraged these strongly positive images.

Coastal and mountain settings were ideal for outdoor leisure activities. As Tombaugh and Bell suggest, sites which offered accessibility to water recreation proved to be especially attractive.¹⁸ Sunbathing was a universal avocation at coastal and lakeside beaches. Fishing was also a popular pastime; and well-stocked mountain lakes in the Sierras and San Bernardino ranges attracted freshwater trout enthusiasts, while the coastal waters off Catalina Island developed a wide reputation among anglers as a "fisherman's Nirvana."¹⁹ Accompanying the desire for sportfishing was the need for boating facilities. Numerous yacht clubs were established from Santa Barbara to San Diego.²⁰ One of the densest collections of yachting enthusiasts was in the Newport-Balboa area south of Los Angeles. By the 1920's, the South Coast Yacht Club, Balboa Yacht Club, and Newport Harbor Yacht Club were established and attracting increasing numbers of summer residents into the area.²¹

Other outdoor leisure activities also were found in summer home communities. By the 1930's, Santa Barbara had three country clubs, a cricket field, a polo ground, a rugby team, numerous tennis courts, and several riding clubs and academies.²² Santa Monica's busy pier became renown as the "Coney Island" of the West Coast, and the "Pike" at Long Beach offered a lengthy midway and thrilling rides for the daring.²³ Individual residences often had patios, barbecue pits, tennis courts, and even stables, all designed to maximize the outdoor amenities and leisure activities of summertime living.²⁴

2. Accessibility as an Amenity—Though few summer home settings were in cities, most seasonal migrants were within easy access of urban areas, including Los Angeles itself. Convenience mattered. The typical summer home was only a one- to four-hour drive from a permanent residence. It was a reflection not of a love for wilderness, but rather of a broad, twentieth-century American move toward more decentralized living environments. Indeed, as David Streatfield observes, the California landscape provided a superb "regional expression of the American

penchant for a suburban life style uniting the best qualities of urban and rural life," and "the development of the California southland up to 1930 displays those aspirations more convincingly and totally than any other region in the country."²⁵ In short, Southern California offered the ideal combination: a range of high-amenity physical environments in relatively close proximity to urban amenities and to the permanent homes of seasonal migrants.

3. *Cultural Amenities* — Distinctive cultural amenities were associated with several summer home communities. For example, Santa Barbara and Montecito were two focal points of the Spanish Colonial revival movement in Southern California. The movement, which shaped the cultural landscape of these communities in various ways, advocated a renewed and often romanticized appreciation for the Spanish and Mexican heritage of the Southland.²⁶ Santa Barbara civic groups, for example, promoted the use of tile roofs, arches, patios, grillwork, earthy tones and stucco walls in commercial buildings.²⁷ The residential landscape also gained national recognition for its novel blend of Italian villa and Spanish Mission styles with the region's Mediterranean environment. The style, through persistent use of patios, gardens, and sleeping porches, placed a heavy emphasis on utilization of outdoor living space.²⁸

Other settings also reflected features of the Spanish Colonial revival landscape. San Clemente, a planned suburban community established in the late 1920's, echoed the Hispanic traditions of the region with its street patterns, local place-names, and architectural styles.²⁹ During the same period, William Wrigley, a land developer on Catalina Island, added similar touches of Spanish design to Avalon's town plan and architecture.³⁰ San Diego and Monterey, both much older focal points of Spanish and Mexican settlement, also drew upon that heritage to attract tourists and seasonal residents.³¹ In addition, many of the interior valleys, from Santa Ynez southward to Rancho Santa Fe, had originally been, as their names suggest, the haunts of Spanish and Mexican ranchers and

farmers. Nearby missions (Santa Ynez, San Fernando, San Gabriel, the San Bernardino Asistencia, and San Luis Rey) lent an additional stamp of authenticity to the Hispanicized historical landscape.

Art colonies were distinctive cultural attractions in several summer home communities. Laguna Beach was a popular center for local artists; and it succeeded, as well, in drawing many seasonal residents.³² By 1932 the Laguna Beach Art Association established its annual Festival of the Arts in August to promote the reputations of local painters. Elsewhere in Southern California, Malibu and La Jolla also boasted growing art colonies during the period; while to the north, the well-established colony at Carmel added contemporary cultural charms to an already spectacular natural and historical setting.³³

4. *Social Amenities* — The desire to locate in close proximity to acquaintances and people of similar socio-economic status is a key factor in understanding the geography of summer home preferences. Thus Southern Californians chose summer home settings in communities where social networks provided the same amenities of privatism and exclusivity that were present in affluent home communities such as West Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, and South Pasadena.

Of all the seasonal communities, the Newport/Balboa Beach area was the most popular. The source areas of Newport/Balboa seasonal migrants reveal the degree of spatial clustering of their permanent residences. The migration patterns are characterized by strong and spatially focused connections with permanent residences in Pasadena, South Pasadena, and San Marino, suggesting that existing social networks in these small, wealthy neighborhoods contributed to a seasonally-based chain migration to the California coast (Figure 3). Many of the migrants from Newport/Balboa belonged to the same clubs and social organizations. Over one-third were members of the Valley Hunt Club; and about 40 percent belonged to either the University Club of Pasadena or the California Club; and a half dozen other social organiza-

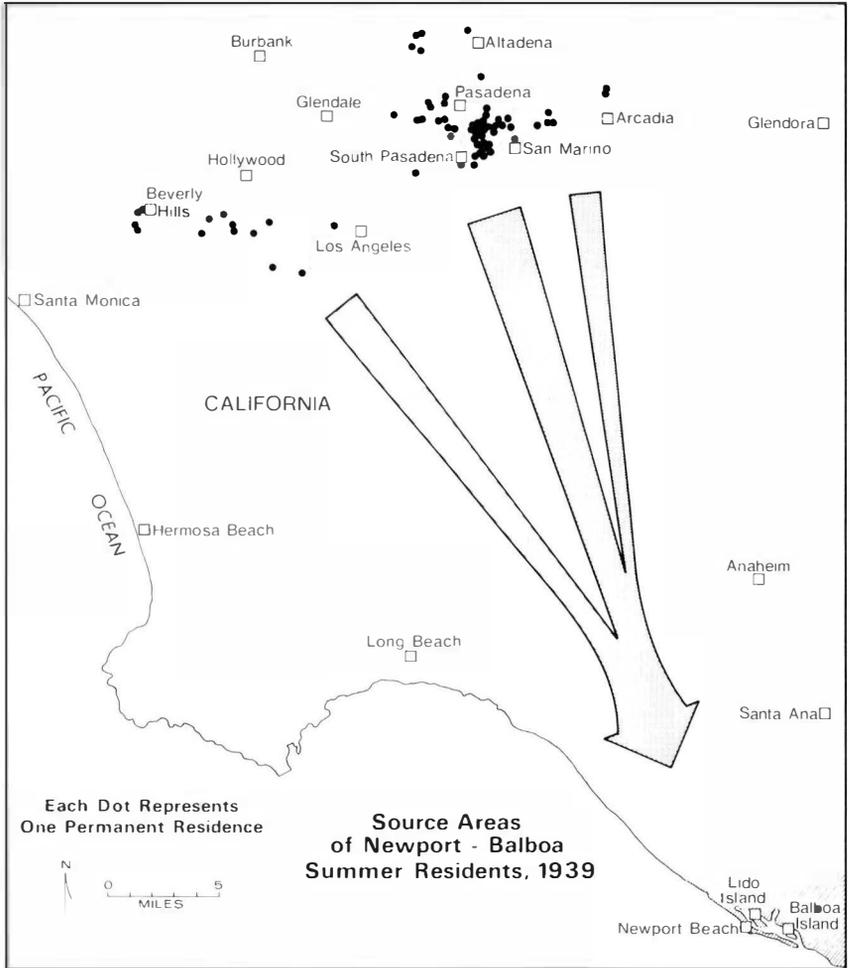


Figure 3. Source areas of Newport-Balboa summer residents, 1939. Source: R. J. Wolfsohn, *Los Angeles Blue Book, 1939* (Los Angeles: R. J. Wolfsohn and W. H. Richardson, 1939).

tions functioned as gathering places for at least four or five individuals who made the July and August trip to the south coast.³⁴ Much of the social fraternity merely was transferred to the sun and sand.

Other examples underscore the importance of social setting as a location factor. The popularity of private beach clubs, yachting facilities, golf clubs, and country clubs, for example, suggests a desire for exclusivity and privatism (Figure 4). Individuals favoring large hotels, such as the ostentatious Hotel del Coronado near San Diego or the Del Monte near Monterey, also opted for settings in which associating with one's social equals was a primary concern (Figure 5).

The pattern of non-local summer homes in the Midwest and Northeast also suggests that the possible importance of enduring social connections superseded other amenities associated with Southern California. Continuing attachments to former homes and to traditional resort settings might explain the locations of summer home settings which extended from Minneapolis to the Maine coast (Figure 2).



Figure 4. Looking toward Ocean Park from Jonathan Beach Club, Santa Monica, California, 1933. Source: Postcard from author's personal collection.

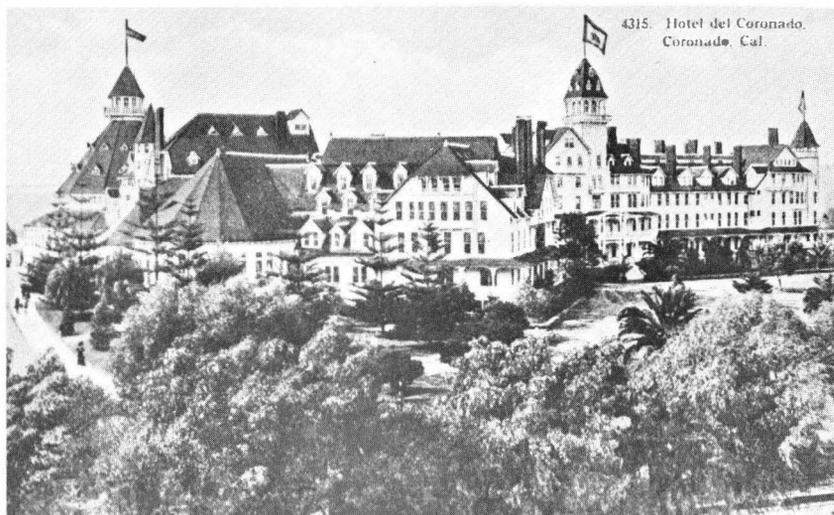


Figure 5. Hotel del Coronado, Coronado, California. Source: Postcard from author's personal collection.

Summer Home Settings as Cultural Landscapes

The summer home settings of the 1930's elite were an expression of long-evolving cultural and economic influences in Southern California. These landscapes also reflect a highly selective slice of the regional scene. They omitted farm laborers and common factory workers, for example; and they did not reflect accurately many of the profound impacts of the Great Depression. Still, they do describe significant changes that were occurring not just in Southern California but in much of American society. First, there was a repeated emphasis on leisure and informal styles of outdoor living. The wealthy often led the way in setting popular tastes for activities such as bicycling, hiking, golf, tennis and boating.³⁵ Southern California, in fact, fostered an entire cult of the outdoors and the body which emphasized the virtues of health and beauty.³⁶ Not surprisingly, those who could afford to do so reflected these attributes in their communities and homes. Because summer home settings normally offered great opportunities for outdoor recreation and sports, their residential land-

scapes effectively blended the inside living environment with the adjacent garden, patio, beach, or forest.

Second, the geography of summer homes emphasizes the importance placed on accessibility and convenience. Although the neighborhood settings for seasonal living were decidedly suburban and rural in character, ready accessibility to urban amenities was a key concern. The data suggest that Californians, given the choice and a degree of economic freedom, would select these accessible suburban and nonmetropolitan environments. Generally, they would avoid both isolated, wilderness settings and large urban centers. The "middle landscapes" selected by wealthy migrants of the 1930's parallel the residential choices made by many contemporary Americans in moderate and high income brackets.³⁷

Finally, the landscapes, institutions, and values emphasized in these summer home communities suggest powerful penchants for individual satisfaction, privatism, and social exclusivity. At the scale of the single dwelling, the eager adaptation of Spanish design emphasized an inward-looking home environment that reflected values of residential privacy and exclusion. In neighborhood settings, it was often the case that homes faced way from the road or were completely hidden from view by trees or shrubbery.³⁸ The larger social exclusivity and social interconnectedness of whole resort communities also was apparent. It tended to bind together insiders, while at the same time increasing social distance from outsiders.

These devotions to leisure, suburban and rural living environments, and individual gratification so strikingly portrayed in the summer home settings of Southern Californians did not depart sharply from mainstream American values of the 1920's and 1930's. They reflected larger transformations shaping the entire culture. What made Southern California so distinctive as a region was the amazing rapidity with which the area, more clearly than any other, reflected these cultural changes, both in social values and on the landscape itself. The economic growth of the 1920's was crucial in this process, because it quickly

created opportunities for change which were then further enhanced by the selective nature of the immigrating population, by the steady increase in the popularity of the automobile, and by the region's native social history and physical environment.

The location factors suggested by the distribution of summer home settings in Southern California and beyond illustrate the rôles played by access to water recreation and the relative accessibility of a seasonal site of permanent residence. In addition, however, cultural and social factors cannot be ignored. Though the precise importance of Spanish Colonial Revival landscapes and art colonies to seasonal migrants of the 1930's is impossible to measure, the frequency of their appearance in summer home settings cannot be ignored. Finally, the data point to possible relationships between summer home settings, social class, and social networks and also suggest that these factors should be accorded more attention in contemporary research on vacation homes and seasonal living preferences.



NOTES

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