



## SUBURBAN LANDSCAPES OF THE EAST BAY

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Rapid urbanization has led to an ever increasing proportion of our population living in cities and surrounding suburbs. With this increase, the actual and perceived quality of intensely humanized urban and suburban landscapes grows in importance. As humans we long for a habitat, a landscape, in which we can develop our full potential (Tuan 1979). How well do suburban landscapes currently meet our needs?

Commonly, the term to "landscape" means to "prettify" (Lewis 1979). Although landscapes are usually thought of in visual terms, they are, in fact, "what we live in, move through and experience with all our senses — sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste" (Kennedy 1989). We have an interactive relationship with landscapes and with vegetation as the predominant natural element in suburban landscapes. In many cases trees may be seen as being a symbol of nature, of the web of life — a condensation of the natural environment. The same might be said of other forms of vegetation. In our relationship with landscapes, emotions as well as practical considerations are involved (Kennedy 1989). Hence, Shroeder (1986) points out the need for research which will help illuminate the emotional attachment people feel for places and associated features such as vegetation. Emotional attachment to place and vegetation is directly related to quality of life and may help us understand why people choose to live or remain in certain places. It could also help us find ways to improve the satisfaction of a city's inhabitants with the city and neighborhood environment (Bartenstein 1981).

Landscapes in the broader sense, are a mixture of humans and nature (Meinig 1979). They are our autobiography, our philosophies and history given tangible form (Meinig 1979; Lewis 1979). Geographers such as Jackson, Relph, Meinig, and Tuan recognize the importance of social

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factors in creating humane, aesthetically pleasing landscapes (Kennedy et al. 1988). And, according to Meinig (1979), "If we want to change the landscape in important ways we shall have to change the ideas that have created and sustained what we see." First, however, we must learn to see the landscape and to try and understand what it is we are seeing.

### Seeing and Understanding Suburban Landscapes

Suburban landscapes are similar to building styles. Various elements can be traced to certain location and eras. This is possible because our suburban landscapes are a compilation of different cultural biases we have gathered along our journey through time and space. These biases can be read in the suburban landscapes in the same way we read housing types. These modified suburban landscapes are not static "walled gardens" separating us from nature as McHarg (1966) claimed, but are instead reflections of our changing cultural interpretations of aesthetics and nature. They comprise features so common-place in our greater American landscape, that they act as symbols of our American home; they are our singular, giant, joint front yard.

The primary analysis of landscapes in this paper reflects the lead author's thirteen year involvement in the landscaping industry. During this time he has maintained, designed, installed, and upgraded many residential and commercial landscapes. The study area includes Contra Costa and Alameda County suburban areas in California's East San Francisco Bay region (Figure 1). Landscape architecture is "the art of arranging or modifying the features of a landscape, in an urban (or suburban) area . . . for aesthetic or practical purposes" (Random House Dictionary 1988). Landscape in this paper largely refers to that area of land designed by a landscape architecture, or designed in a similar fashion. It also refers, however, in the broader sense, to our habitat, our surroundings. In both instances landscape is anthropogenic; in the first it is primarily a planned environment, in the latter a reflection of our philosophies and ideas — conscious and otherwise.

In the East Bay, as in many other suburban communities throughout America, designed landscapes can be broken into three major categories: residential, commercial, and city-owned public land (although county, state, and federal land may also be present, they are not dealt with here). Many shared design elements, plantings, and other materials are found in all three landscape types. Each type, however, has its own characteristics and its own aesthetic qualities which serve a common purpose — that of beauty.

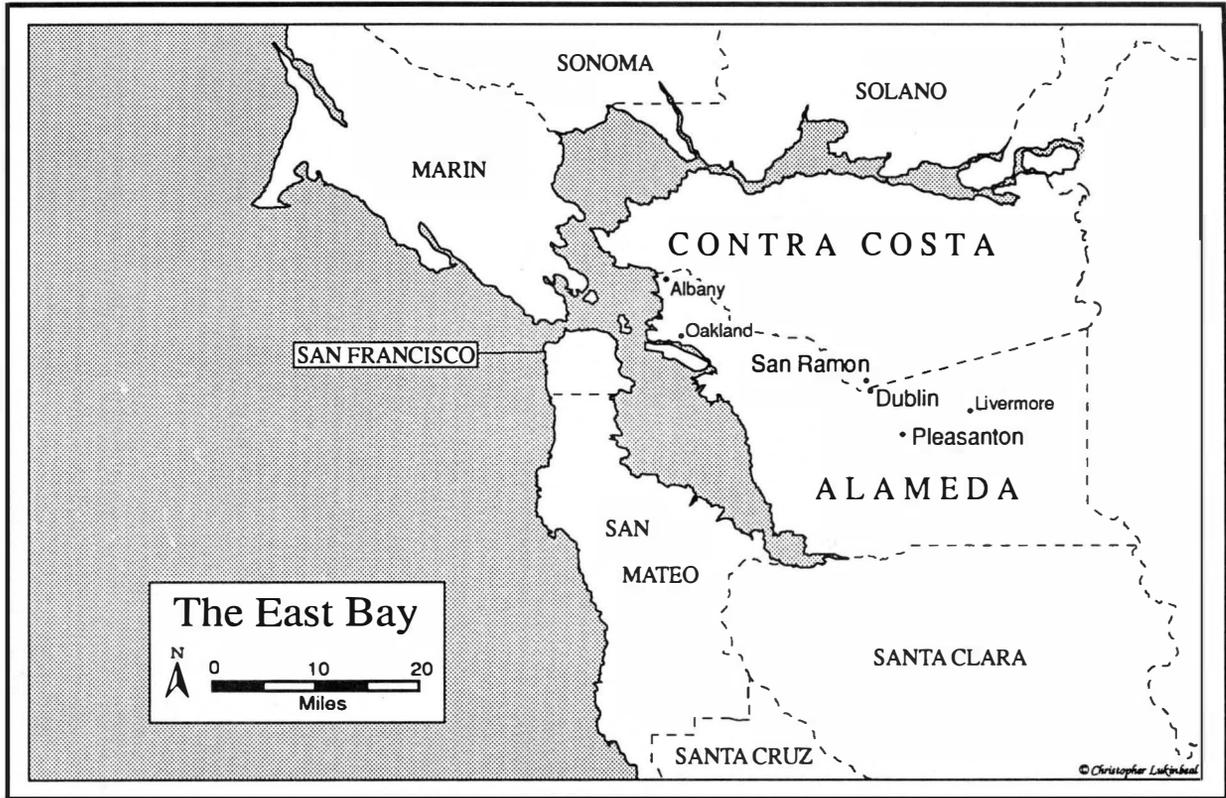


Figure 1. Location of towns in east bay study area

This paper presents an overview of three suburban landscape types in the East Bay. Recurring and unique elements found in each type are discussed. Views on suburban landscapes are reviewed. And, finally, we argue that these landscapes are much more than "walled gardens", not only are they integral parts of suburbia, but, as a whole comprise an American symbol.

### Overview

**Residential Landscapes.** Residential landscaping combines uniquely personal space (the back yard) with communal aesthetics (the front yard). The Back yard can be viewed as a "setting for outdoor living", where the "form of the garden owes more to the house and family activities than to requirements of plants. The back yard is social rather than horticultural" (Grampp 1985). Back yards are usually enclosed areas, blocked off from the rest of the neighborhood by shrubbery and trees. They more truly represent "yards" as defined by Paul Groth (1990), a word that signifies enclosure. Back yards tend to reflect residents' personalities more than front yards. Back yards can be seen as extensions of the house — outdoor rooms (Grampp 1985). They provide private space for social gatherings, growing fruits and vegetables, or for work and storage (Kennedy 1989). In these contexts, back yards may become places to store old washers and used cars, or to keep pets. They may also be sanctuaries, rooms distinguished by their "esthetic environment", places of rest (Grampp 1985).

The communal aesthetics of front yards "are a national institution—essential to every home, like a Bible somewhere in the house." Front yards are public, places to be viewed by outsiders and by the community. They serve as a social "index of the taste and enterprise of the family who owns" or lives in this home. We subjectively rank a family's community pride and personal cleanliness by the quality of their front yards; "weeds and dead limbs are a disgrace, and the man who rakes and waters and clips after work is usually held to be a good citizen" (Jackson 1951, 3). The main purpose of front yards is seen as improving the appearance of the neighborhood (Kennedy 1989).

Front yards are not merely individual entities. Combined with streets, they comprise "the open, flowing, parklike spaces we now associate with upper-middle-class suburban life" (Groth 1990). This open space is sometimes protected by laws where cities restrict fence height. It is also protected by unwritten laws. Neighbors tend to frown upon residents that fence in their front yard and cut off a part of the open space from the rest of the community. When a fence was put up in the

front yard of an Albany neighborhood many residents expressed dismay. "It cut into everyone's space" (Grampp 1988).

According to Jackson (1951), residential landscapes as a whole "provide a place for outdoor enjoyment and indicate social standing." The true purpose is "probably very simple: it exists to satisfy a love of beauty. Not every beauty, but beauty of a special, familiar kind; one that every American can recognize and enjoy, and even after a fashion recreate for himself".

### **Commercial Landscapes**

Businesses, apartment complexes and condominiums are places of profit and loss. In commercial landscapes there are only front yards. Landscapes here are, aesthetically, oriented outward toward the community. These landscapes are maintained by professional landscapers and are typically carefully groomed environments where every detail is seen to. Personality is removed. They become symbols of J. B. Jackson's "establishment", of an orderly working environment. They reflect permanence and order. Tight geometric shrubs, straight lines, and clean edges are the norm. Commercial landscapes often appear to be pale copies of Classical gardens of old.

Like residential front yards, commercial landscapes can be used as social and economic indices. Companies' and apartments' social climate and economic standing are reflected in the quality and cleanliness of the landscapes. In general, the more money a company makes the more carefully groomed (or as it is called in the trade, "detailed") its landscape appears. There are exceptions, however, when corporations believe that an aesthetically pleasing landscape is a commodity they don't need, or when it is a low priority economically. Commercial landscapes, more than any, perpetuate Nohl's (1985) criticism that "nature is being destroyed by design".

### **City-owned, Public Landscapes**

Areas throughout a city which are landscaped for aesthetic purposes and parks which are landscaped for activity purposes are important elements in a city's appearance. Public parks, predominantly large open lawns bordered by trees and occasionally shrubbery, make up the largest part of these landscapes. Their purpose is to provide an open common green where community activities can take place. This is the objective value of these areas but J. B. Jackson (1951) suggests that the "lawn with its vague but nonetheless real social connotations is precisely

that landscape element which every American values the most. Unconsciously he identifies it with every group event in his life. . . ."

Landscapes designed primarily for aesthetic purposes exist along city streets. They include medians, areas around interchanges, intersections, and major arterials. City landscaping also includes areas around the library, city hall, and related buildings. The landscaping around city buildings is similar to that of commercial landscapes. There is no backyard. The purpose is communal aesthetics. City landscapes are, however, generally not as rigidly structured or "detailed" as commercial landscapes. Like commercial landscapes, the social and economic index also applies here. The more money a city has, the more "detailed" the landscape will be.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the cities' landscapes is along its roadways. These areas can give the city an overall theme or personality. It is here that many suburban cities try to emphasize their differences from neighboring cities and to promote their city as an individual entity, thus enhancing its "sense of place". A good example of this can be seen in the comparison of the three neighboring cities of Pleasanton, Dublin and San Ramon. Street treatment in Pleasanton consists primarily of lawns with Sycamore trees and shrubbery (Figure 2). In Dublin it is primarily brick patterns, Sycamore trees, with *Escallonia*, *Euryops*, *Agapanthus*, *Raphiolepis*, and *Xylosma* shrubs. San Ramon, recently finished landscaping much of its adjacent street property. Jim Estep (1992) of the public services division of the city explained that San Ramon made sure that their landscapes would be different than the other cities in the area. Estep explained that they wanted a look that would be unique. To obtain this they choose a "handful a plants" to create a theme, a communal character. Tree selection was essential. First they looked to see what other cities had used and avoided these species.

### Elements in the Landscape

Regions are partially defined by repetition and elaboration on landscaping themes. Residents and landscape architects see things that they like in other landscapes and imitate them. Ideas spread through diffusion, yet cultural biases and neighborhood restrictions also play a role in what a landscape looks like. Many reoccurring elements can be traced through the cities of Pleasanton, Dublin, and San Ramon. We will focus the elements of time and growth management, climate and culture, and landscape as a selling feature. Other constraining factors that determine what landscapes look like include climatic and pedological factors,



Figure 2. Landscaping of streets, such as this one in Pleasanton, is intended to create a positive sense of place

nursery and supplier stocks, design characteristics, maintenance styles, plant and material selection, personal and communal preference, and economic considerations.

**Time.** Time has a significant effect on the appearance of landscapes. Landscape may reflect fashions and climatic conditions from the era in which it was designed. The city of Pleasanton with all of its green lawns was installed in in the early 1980's before drought became a factor. San Ramon's landscapes, on the other hand, was designed and installed during a period of continuing drought.

**Growth Management.** Time is also reflected by growth. How we interact with plant growth in our suburban environment can tell us a lot about ourselves. In suburbia the trend is to manage plant growth. Allowance for plant growth varies in each of the three areas. Growth is the most severely limited in commercial and residential front yards. Cities and residential backyards tend to have a greater growth allowance. Strict growth management can be related to a desire to keep an environment uniform and unchanged. In such environments change and age do not exist, human/nature interaction is thwarted, and "peo-

ple have little opportunity for imaginative activities, and nature has little opportunity for unhindered growth" (Nohl 1985) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Growth management of vegetation is most severely limited in commercial and residential front yards

This type of strict growth management is what we generally identify with landscape architecture. In our culture, landscape architecture has been identified with garden-making where we tend to perceive our ideal landscapes as arranged "in a simple geometry as a comprehensibly metaphysical symbol of a benign and orderly world" (McHarg 1966, 527). In such landscapes "no concept of community or association becloud the objective" (McHarg 1966, 527) and people become:

... frustrated by the facilities that dictate our activities, and the spread of vegetation is thwarted by constant maintenance. The appropriation of open spaces by nature or by users is also made difficult because the design produced by the landscape architect is often regarded as a work of art and because implementing and maintaining the design is expensive. As a result of high maintenance costs, authorities often set up constraints to prevent the public from determining how they will use open spaces and to restrict the growth of plants (Nohl 1985, 39).

Less stringent growth management can provide a sense of continuity, promote human/nature interaction, and increase our esthetic enjoyment (Nohl 1985). Growth allows for a landscape to have a past, thus providing continuity. Continuity between past, present, and future, aids

human/nature interactions and can promote community belonging. Esthetic enjoyment is increased when we “perceive not only colors, shapes, and smells — the perceptive level — but if the objects disclose the processes behind them, whether past, present, or future” (Nohl 1985, 37). With less emphasis placed on growth management, landscapes reflect a more natural state — a state that is not rigidly structured, a state where plants shape themselves (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Less stringent growth management allows this commercial residential landscape to reflect a more “natural” state

Cities and backyards tend to place less constraints on growth. Jim Estep explained that this is accomplished in cities not so much by design as by the scale at which the maintenance takes place. There is allowance for growth as the community grows. This can promote some assurance to inhabitants of permanence and belonging within a city, of a shared growth with the city. A resident might even fondly reminisce “I remember when that tree was only so high.”

In the East Bay landscape maintenance makes up around forty percent of the waste going to landfills. With less stringent growth management this biomass waste could be limited. Cutting lawns less frequently and maintaining them at a taller cutting height the lawns requires less water. A move towards freer growth would require a change in cultural

perceptions and in landscaping preferences. Currently many people tend to associate tight, formal hedges and short cut lawns with a clean, orderly, and desirable environment.

### Climate and Culture

From an ecological perspective, a landscape is "a heterogeneous land area composed of a cluster of interacting ecosystems that is repeated in similar form throughout" (Forman and Gordon 1986). The three suburban landscape types form interacting ecosystems. Regional climate and the seasons play a large role in a landscape's appearance. Every spring flowering trees and shrubs such as *Prunus*, *Pyrus*, *Camellias*, and *Euryops* bloom. In summer, suburban areas in the East Bay are colored with annuals. During autumn Sycamores, Oaks, Birches, Alders and other deciduous trees drop their leaves. In the winter lawns turn brown and trees are pruned. Climate not only influences plant selection but it also affects the landscape in more direct ways. For example, in the winter of 1990-1991, the East Bay was subjected to extremely cold weather and heavy freezes. Many trees and shrubs were partially or completely killed. Effects from this freeze are still apparent in our landscapes today.

Climate and culture coexist in the lawn. The lawn carries social connotations and can be traced to its English origins. In England there is abundant water and grassy meadows occur naturally year round (Jackson 1951). In our Mediterranean climate, however, water is a valuable and limited resource and lawns are one of suburbia's largest water consumers. In this instance, our cultural preference seems to outweigh economic and climatic factors. Many people in the East Bay, however, are starting to question the value of a lawn. Home owners have to decide what to do when a beautiful green lawn turns into a water/money consuming commodity. In some instances, lawns are being replaced with gravel, or with bark and shrubbery (Figure 5).

Many new landscapes in all three areas reflect this more drought tolerant attitude. Still the lawn will not likely disappear because the preference for it is so deeply ingrained that it continues to be a major selling element for new home buyers (Bowman 1992; Lukinbeal 1992).

### Landscape as Selling Feature

The final recurring element we wish to discuss is the way in which landscapes act as selling items. Not only lawns, but also well groomed yards are significant factors that are considered when people are buying



Figure 5. Rock, gravel, and bark are replacing lawns in many East Bay yards in an attempt to conserve water, money, and maintenance time at a home. Grampp (1985) interviewed one family who commented, "When I saw the heather in the front yard, I knew I wanted the house. I didn't even need to see the inside" .

In commercial landscapes, the ideal of selling plays an important role in the shape and appearance of a landscape. In large business parks, such as Hacienda Business Park in Pleasanton, and Airway Business Park in Livermore, landscaped areas exist prior to construction of the buildings. In this context, landscape is used to sell a company an image of what their corporation will look like behind beautiful green lawns. Corporate landscapes often reflect generic national preferences rather than regional differences.

Owners of expensive apartment complexes insist that it is the beauty of the grounds and greenness of their lawns that attract tenants to their site (Carney 1991). In such a context, a carefully manicured garden complex is seen as promoting the image of a respectable community in which people have a better standard of living than in overgrown, unkept complexes. Industries such as fast food outlets and gas stations also offer the potential customer a "wholesome and neat appearance" because "dyspeptic design does not promote sales" (Relph 1981).

## Viewpoints

**Anti-suburban sentiment.** Suburban landscapes often are viewed with distaste. "It is a thoroughly accepted academic practice to condemn suburban landscapes and suburban living" (Relph 1981). Even though these are the landscapes that many of us are raised in and live in, it is hard for us to understand and appreciate their beauty. We long instead for virgin wilderness, for a time gone by, a place out of our past where scenic wonders offer beauty to our eyes and romance to our hearts. These are the "sacred" landscapes that stands in opposition to the "profane" domesticated landscape (Erickson 1977).

Suburban landscapes are forced to compete aesthetically with these non-humanized landscapes and with landscapes containing natural wonders such as National Parks. According to Salter (1983), "we tend to evaluate the landscape around us through the eyes of our other non-urban self. The dichotomy between where we want to be and what we want to see has led to a peculiar blindness in our landscape appreciation".

Conron (1973) points out that "landscape means, quite simply, the land's shape as it is seen from a particular and defined perspective" where perception —

...applies not only to the physical outlook but also to a psychic outlook, we come to see that landscape includes both a physical and an ideal shape. . . The visible image, of a personal or cultural point of view—an ideal design of hopes, needs, values, and ideas which both shapes and takes shape in landscape (xvii).

It is in the suburban landscape that the dominant, middle class American culture express itself. It is here that both the beauty and ugliness of a significant part of our culture takes shape in the land. In "America and in no other culture has the spatial construct of landscape been ... indispensable, for we seem to see ourselves as a people living in space more than in time, in an environment more than in a history" (Conron 1973). Thus, much in our landscape represents timelessness and lacks continuity.

To understand and enjoy the suburban landscape, one must perceive it for what it is — a domesticated landscape. It is *not* a natural landscape. Zube (1982) explains that —

...those who experience the wilderness on a continuing basis in their day to day activities sensed that savage and aesthetic qualities coexisted within the same landscapes. They recognized beauty but were also confronted with the realities of a landscape that was simultaneously harsh and dangerous.

We, however, living day to day amidst suburban landscapes, fail to recognize their beauty because "a personal preference proves immiscible with a societal preference" (Everden 1985). Our societal preference is lost somewhere in the romance of a vast, wonderful, and dangerous wilderness. As long as we view human activity as "despoilation" and "pristine nature as perfection" (Meinig 1979), the more difficult it will be to come to terms with and to appreciate the humanized landscapes we have created. The suburban environment has its own special and unique beauty. Beauty can be found in a personalized yard, the structure and color of a Japanese maple. Our senses can be enriched by the smell of fresh cut lawn or the pungency of sesame seeds that radiates from the leaves of *Podocarpus*.

### A Relationship with the Land

Relph argues that the quality missing from suburban landscapes is personal commitment — because the manner in which these landscapes are planned and developed systematically denies it. To him these "excessively humanized" landscapes are "dehumanizing" because the only changes one may make are "trivial ones". He claims that "the small freedom of an individual to be involved in making or to be responsible for a fragment of the landscape has been denied"(Relph 1981).

We believe Relph underestimates personal involvement in suburban landscapes. People move to suburbia in order to own or rent a house with a plot of land. By having a yard one either becomes responsible or chooses not to be responsible for that landscape. People who choose the former begin an interaction with the land. Residents may design their own yards, select plant species, and complete the work themselves. Even if residents choose to hire a landscaper, however, they are being responsible for their land and have an influence on it. This influence reflects their expectations of what they think *their* landscape should look like. In either case, it is these so-called "trivial" aspects — the choices, thought, and involvement — that provide a sense of commitment to the land and give the landscape personality. Whether through attentiveness or apathy, our perceptions and choices shape the suburban landscape around us.

Suburban landscapes can promote a sense of belonging to the area through their common characteristics and, for the long term resident, through their growth. Cities in the East Bay attempt to promote a sense of unity and "sense of place" through their landscape design. Furthermore, attachment to a suburban place can be shaped over time as designed landscapes grow into their desired form. Attachment is espe-

cially likely to develop when residents design their own landscape or plant trees and shrubs. Plants are like domesticated animals, dependant on man for their survival, and are "man's cohorts, sharing his domestication" (McHarg 1966). Home owners, tenants, and office personal often develop attachment for certain aspects of a landscape. This attachment develops through interaction with the landscape. Indirect interaction with the landscape occurs when a person expresses an idea about an aspect of the landscape to the landscaper who then makes their idea — their perception — a reality. Although some aspects of suburbia may act to "dehumanize" the environment, landscapes provide an arena in which personality, cultural bias, commitment, and belonging can be seen. As Jackson (1951) points out,

As one travels west . . . you begin to mark the contrast between the yard and its surroundings. It occurs to you that the yard is sometimes a very artificial thing, the product of much work and thought and care. Whoever tends them so well... must think them very important .

### Suburban Landscape as Symbol

Ian McHarg (1966) argues that suburban landscapes are walled gardens and that, as such, they play an important symbolic role in our society:

...the walled garden [is] separated from nature, a symbol of beneficence, islands of delight, tranquillity, introspection... Not only is this a selected nature, decorative and benign, but the order of its array is, unlike the complexity of nature, reduced to a simple and comprehensible geometry. This is then a selected nature, simply ordered to create a symbolic reassurance of a benign and orderly world, an island within the world and separate from it. . . the garden symbolizes domesticated nature, the wild is beyond.

Nature is, however, a part of the anthropogenic landscape — a key element that blends itself into the "walled garden". Suburbia is not enclosed and separate from the natural world. It is affected by natural processes, by weather and time, and by encroachment of native and exotic species. McHarg is correct, however, that this is a "selected nature". Nohl suggests that we have selected pieces from the "totality of nature" in such a way that these suburban landscapes present us "with subjectively based 'graphic' images" of nature that show a "harmonious unity of the cosmos", thus "making them relevant" for us (McHarg 1985).

Suburban landscapes are portraits of both local and national culture. They also, however, reflect personal decisions. When viewing a landscape one should consider three aspects: the designer's original intent,

adjustments made to the design by previous owners or by the city, and the current inhabitant's perspective on the landscape. One perspective may be to ignore the landscape. This, in itself, tells us something about their attitude towards the landscape. Landscapes are constantly changing. As Relph (1981) points out, they are multi-layered, rooted in cultural history, and reflect both the technology and philosophical outlook of the present.

Suburban landscapes are our cultural interpretations of an idealized landscape. Yet with time and each generation, the values associated with these landscapes change to accommodate a new generation's values. As Jackson (1951) pointed out over forty years ago, and as is true of suburban landscapes in the East Bay today:

A new human landscape is beginning to emerge... It is even now being created by the same combinations of forces that created the old one: economic necessity, technological evolution, changes in social outlook and in our outlook on nature. Like the landscape of the present, this new one will in time produce its own symbols and its own beauty.

## Conclusion

Suburban landscapes can be interpreted symbolically. As symbols they are a combination — a synthesis — of nature and culture; they affect our perceptions and provide contrasting elements to compare with more natural places. These landscapes are truly American. Representing our interface with the lands' surface, they are one interpretation of the relationship between culture and nature. They, therefore, symbolically represent a continuing struggle within ourselves. As our civilization has evolved we have alienated ourselves from nature, thus creating a great longing for nature. The more civilized our culture becomes the greater our apparent need for natural beauty. Through suburban landscapes we attempt to find a new union with nature. According to Nohl (1985), if less emphasis placed on growth management and abatement, a freer, more natural "interplay between human use and the forces of nature" might exist.

Suburban landscapes are ideal American symbols of our cultural adaptation and our blending with nature. Rooted in the past, these landscapes reflect an areas taste, economy, and individuality. Culturally, most of us long to dabble with the earth and change it in some way. Our desire to have an effect on our surroundings appears to be stronger than our desire to be "one" with our surroundings. We want to see ourselves in the landscape, give our mortality continuity through our interactions with the earth. Culturally and individually this is reflected in the suburban landscape, in every pruned tree and shrub,

in every stylized yard, and in every personalized domesticated plant. Through less stringent growth controls on vegetation and greater sensitivity to local climate and native vegetation, suburban landscapes can provide us access back to nature.

People generally seek comfort, whether it be physical comfort or emotional comfort. In doing so they often modify their surroundings or choose to live in a landscape in which they feel at home. The suburbs are "home" to an ever increasing number of people. Questions arise regarding exactly what constitutes a humane, liveable landscape? How can we better create a sense of place and nurture people's sense of belonging? How can we take a non-expressive landscape and make it more responsive to our needs? The challenges are broad and include a need to find solutions which take into account people's emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs as well as their physical ones. But first, in order to do this we must actually "see" and understand the suburban landscapes we have created.



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