



## The Open Space Dilemma

*Chris Mayda*

Open space  
God's country  
Garden of Eden  
40 acres and a mule  
home sweet home  
let freedom sing  
the right to be me  
12 children, 2 survive  
ones got palsy, the other's alive  
died in the field  
Let them eat cake

Closed space  
fear of the unknown  
fences  
protection  
frustrated aggression  
confusion  
rough and ready  
stiff upper lip  
wit in the city  
so many die  
it's a pity  
The dream...  
for the children  
Labor for thee team  
if you don't make the cream  
Hope

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No space  
elevator music with  
individual rights  
equality for the masses  
but  
don't touch me  
or I might . . .  
lost  
a tract house  
Beemer and  
microwave  
There's a computer  
in your future  
your number please  
your number  
alone  
quiet screaming  
at the greyness

Time and space. A continuum.

We never had much time  
We gave ourselves too much space

Your number please . . .

572 76 7306-672 0799 I mean 8, I mean . . .

I'm sorry your number does not compute . . . does not compute  
57276 7306 672 0798

The seminar was about Frederick Jackson Turner and his idea of the closing of the frontier and its impact on America. It had been 100 years since his seminal speech, and now The Organization of American Historians wanted to see how Turner still, or if he still, influenced the world. One mention was made of the Marlboro man during the seminar. What I did not expect to happen, of course, did. During the question and answer period that followed, almost every question revolved around the Marlboro Man. Why? How did this image of the western man on the range, this myth of reality, come to dominate the attention of the distinguished historians in the audience? Why do we insist on believing in a consumer myth, while ignoring reality? Why do we relish the rugged individual cowboy as space closes in America? Why do we not look to other open spaces, beyond the physical?

### Historical Background

America, frontier: words within the same breath. The American frontier was at once all seven wonders of the world. A densely populated Europe found a safety valve for its unwanted, socially, politically and spiritually. In one word, it was America. Its vast expanses of "empty land" awaited the enlightened civilization of Western European thought (native Americans were "primitive" and in need of "cultivation"). And the country grew rapidly, from 3.9 million in 1790, to 62 million in 1890. But still in 1890 the United States had a quarter of the people it has today. Kansas had more people than California.<sup>1</sup> But the American frontier continued to grow and change. Land disappeared under the plow and homes that people built. The free, independent and individual spirit that all this open land engendered made Americans something other than their European predecessors.

America had been built on the myth of never ending land. Manifest destiny was not controlled by fences. Anything was possible in America. And so this announcement of the frontiers closing in the 1890 Census had intellectuals fearing for America:

Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.

This brief official statement created a career for the historian and geographer Frederick Jackson Turner. Using it as a springboard he delivered a short paper at the Chicago Worlds Fair in 1893. The article, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," was initially ignored, but eventually would forever change the way American historians viewed the United States and its historical roots. Geographers took note of this and throughout Turner's life he would converse with geographers as Ellen Churchill Semple.

Early theories of American development revolved around the European 'germ' theory, in which the European settler was seen as the shaper of the landscape rather than the American landscape influencing and shaping the European settler. Turner's paper forwarded the idea that Americans were formed by the open space of the frontier.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1890 census shows Kansas at 1,428,000 and California with 1,213,398. (1993 World Almanac).

Americans were proud of this idea and embraced it as a tonic during the difficult depression of the 1890s. But the article contained another message that was more difficult to accept, in fact, Americans have not yet accepted it. The physical open spaces of the great American continent were closed.

Prior to the 'frontier thesis' as the theory was soon called, American academics had been on shaky ground in relation to their place in history, when placed against the larger historical backdrop of European academia. History has not fully matured as a recognized profession. Up to the time of Turner's thesis, history had been written from a local viewpoint by amateur, gentlemen historians. The nineteenth century Romantic presented a view of history that was moral and heroic with epic proportions. History was not seen as an interacting continuum, but as a series of tales meant to instill nationalism and pride (Hofstadter 1968).

In the last years of the nineteenth century historians who had been formally trained in history began to appear in American universities. They were middle class men instead of the gentlemen historians of the past. History, previously used only as an introduction to another curriculum such as classical languages, became a subject in itself. The study of history was influenced by the scientific work of Darwin and the evolutionary process. This influenced not only history but anthropology, sociology and geography. Different forms of determinism sprouted from the evolutionary idea. Biology had biologic determinism, geography, environmental determinism and history had its own determinism, historical evolutionism.

Comparative history became important. The fragmentation of the past was used and compared with hopes to understanding the truth of the past and its relevance to the present. Turner was influenced by these new forces when he studied at Johns Hopkins in the 1880s. He then continued his education at the University of Wisconsin.

Turner's generation was the first to work on PhD dissertations in the modern mode of a consummate original work. This was accomplished not by a stream of narrative, but by development of ideas, such as the frontier thesis. Turner's dissertation focused on Wisconsin fur traders. In this work he learned the importance of geography to the fur traders and to history. He emphasized the march of civilization starting with the primitive and advancing with traders, hunters, settlers and urban dwellers.

He applied this line of thinking when he issued the frontier thesis. The frontier had developed from an open space and followed in a similar line of civilization from trappers to cities. What crystallized the idea

was the closing of the final 'frontier' of open space in America as announced by the 1890 census. The traditional definition of the open space frontier, areas with less than two people per square mile, had been surpassed.

Turner saw the American model shattered. The mythical space of the new Atlantis, America, had disappeared into cities and industry. The individual no longer was the center. It was now the group, the democracy of many, and those who sought new life from the one on one with the land were destitute in the coming America that Turner foresaw. Americans would have to change and become something new if they were to survive. They would look to democracy and the government to reform their ideals.<sup>2</sup> And they would have to face new social problems. Turner was at pains to face the downfall of individualism, for a more common and holistic good, the group (Turner 1920). He believed in individual innovation and believed that it served man's highest destiny, but it could no longer be in a closed space environment. The highest aspiration had to be in getting along with the neighbor, as there was no longer a "safety-valve" frontier for escape.

Turner believed that the three things that the frontier fostered in the pioneer were innovation, individualism and democracy. With the fall of the individual, and the lack of opportunity for innovation with the loss of free open space, he only had democracy to hold onto as his relic of America. He did not want a democracy of de Tocqueville's mediocrity, but instead a democracy that allowed the American to grow beyond the physical expanses of space and conquer new frontiers.

As we turn from the task of the first rough conquest of the continent there lies before us a whole wealth of unexploited resources in the realm of the spirit. Arts and letters, science and better social creation, loyalty and political service to the commonweal, —these and a thousand other directions of activity are open to the men, who formerly under the incentive of attaining distinction amassing extraordinary wealth, saw success only in material display (Turner 1920).

Turner thought and wrote about the loss of the frontier and open space for the rest of his life. In his lectures he spoke of the loss of the individual, who saw government as an evil (Turner 1920). He spoke of democracy whose safeguard was the free lands of the United States

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<sup>2</sup> "He saw the government no longer something outside of him, but the people themselves shaping their own affairs... Legislation is taking the place of the free lands as the means of preserving the ideal of democracy." (Turner 1920, 305).

(Turner 1920). He saw these as the conditions that shaped the underlying fundamental beliefs in America. When free land disappeared all else was threatened and new orders had to replace what was lost. With the Progressive Party beginning to view socialism as an answer, people began to look to the government to protect what they had,<sup>3</sup> and rather than evolving from "success only in material display," a myth was born.

### The Myth of Open Space in America

Mythology is a story that gives meaning to individual lives on a surreal level. To the archaic societies these stories are true, in a sacred sense. Yet in the positivist English language the word "myth" means fictitious, falsehood, illusion, fantasy: all words discounted by the reality and "truth" of science.

Every culture has its own mythology. We are most aware of the Greek and Roman mythologies of Zeus and Jupiter. But few today look at these stories as having any relevance to actual people. They seem merely pretty stories. But as Bill Moyers said, "Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance" (Campbell 1987). In America our understanding of ourselves stems from the myth of the open spaces of the frontier. Hence, the popularity of the ubiquitous Marlboro man.

In America, myths are relegated to the mere stance of stories, rather than the more spiritual search for origins. Legends of Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and Johnny Appleseed exist, but as men, mostly ideal macho types that persisted to conquer the frontier. These were men, not Gods, individual trailblazers and conquerors of the earth. But they still represent the birth of the American nation, separate from its European roots.

Unlike the Greek or Roman myths, where Gods and Goddesses were not human, who had no pretensions of humanity, the American myth is flesh and blood, without the supernatural.

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<sup>3</sup> "The present finds itself engaged in the task of readjusting its old ideals to new conditions and is turning increasingly to government to preserve its traditional democracy. It is not surprising that socialism shows noteworthy gains as elections continue...that the demand for initiative, referendum, and recall is spreading, and that the regions once the center of pioneer democracy exhibit these tendencies in the most marked degree. They are efforts to find substitutes for that former safeguard of democracy, the disappearing free lands. They are the sequence to the extinction of the frontier" (Turner 1914, 321).

As these myths were formed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they were heavily influenced by the thought of that time. A modern myth does not have room for that which cannot be proved in a scientific way. With scientific, enlightened, capitalist thought, myth becomes another type of reality without its mythic proportions. The western man was idealized as the cowboy, Marlboro man, the conqueror, or even the itinerant Appleseed, the rugged individual who spread his wares for profit to the settlers. There is no room for a relationship with the land, as the 'primitive' native had, but only room to conquer it and move on in the evolutionary path of progress, as defined by the capitalist. Other forms of progress, other forms of thought, beyond logical rationalization, were not valid. But still, this myth incorporates the individual man in open space, even as the world closes in.

### Closing of Open Space

Open space is a peculiarly American mythic ideal. The lure of the wide expanses of land was much of what formed the European immigrant into the new American man. The first immigrants to America were European in origin and came from a continent that was suffering from population pressures, both agriculturally and socially. The outcasts of the social climate of the times, mostly strict Protestant observers, left Europe searching for freedom in the wild unknown territory that was to become the Americas, part of which became the United States.

America was born in a land that was without history as Europeans defined it. Different from the European continent, the American continents were newly discovered and the history still nascent. There was no room for ancient creation myths, as the settlers were all immigrants. The Europeans who settled here did not respect the myths already in place with the land they settled. Though the American native population had a rich mythic history, the Europeans did not look to become a part of the land they settled but instead to bring what they already had to the new land and transform it into another European culture. They were somewhat successful. The culture in America today is a bastardized model of European culture, but there is a new element, that try as they might the Europeans were unable to suppress. The land had an influence on the settler. The land continued to lure immigrants across its frontiers forming a new culture, influenced by its geography.

Geography provided a sense of meaning to Americans that they did not have with history. The open spaces, the "unconquered" wilderness gave the Americans something that few Europeans had, an opportunity for freedom. The geography, the seemingly unlimited space of the conti-

nent, created a mythical world of the wild west, the frontier, where any man could create a home and keep his cherished beliefs. The western frontier became a myth for America to idealize, even today.

The creation in American myth was the birth of the most glorious capitalism Europeans could have ever dreamed. The difference, though, between the primitive myths and ours was a choice of gods. Previous gods were supernatural humans, but the American god was a reification of its ideal, profit. True to its objective nature, the God of the United States is not a human, or superhuman, but instead, like the super powers of the country, the non-corporeal corporation, the god is a non-corporeal vestige of production and consumption. Unlike the past myths of primal times, man no longer belonged with the earth, the sacred nature was gone, and instead nature was looked at as something that man should dominate. This was accomplished by separating man from his body by the mechanistic view of the world. "Survival of the fittest" Spencer's homily to Darwin's theory, was extended naturally to man's dominion over nature. Man was to be the fittest, over a nature no longer ruled by a supernatural god, but instead a reified god of "natural laws." The machine man had been created to take over for him as master of the universe, his own god, controller. According to these laws the corporeal man was allowed a certain equation of rights, which the land was to provide.

The land that America offered was not there to be blessed, but to bless those who took advantage of it. The land was there to be used. Everyone had the right to "40 acres and a mule." There was space for everyone in America. There was plentiful free land and open space. This was the basis of the American ideal, the American dream. So when the land ran out and the myth that had been reality became unreal, the American people never realized it and continue to search for open space even now as it closes to nothingness. Part of that search today is in drugs (another 'reality'), gangs (territoriality) and delusionary grander utopias (cults). Each of these 'answers' give people what they find they do not have today, the power to have their own open 'space.'

### **From Open Space to Closed Space, to No Space**

The primitive man saw the myth as a true story of the far past that he could never replicate, but only strive for. American man sees the Western cowboy myth as something also true, but something that he can attain. This comes by driving a Jeep, or smoking a Marlboro, or wearing jeans. The individual man can become the 'god' of his myth. The objective scientific American myth has no use for the supernatural, the mysti-

cal, the unattainable. The American myth is here and now, and there is no discipline of waiting for fruition. Grab it while you may for tomorrow might never come. The simple myth gives man a direction, a reason to be, the American myth gives man frustration.

Woman is not as lost. She was never involved in the American traditional myth as man was, so she is able to connect and reenact certain myths, trying to find solace. But the lack of historical tradition has robbed women as it has men, and they search for an elusive mother that never landed in America.

The American myth can only be the consumer world we have created. We will not find our salvation in another culture's mythic tradition. Myth requires an identification by the people: a sacrifice that is communion with the supernatural. Americans identify and sacrifice? This oxymoron provides a clue why the Marlboro man myth lives on. The wild west allows us to be free of the stresses of closed in living. In the open space of the frontier we, as the pioneers, do not have to deal with our neighbors unless we choose to. This freedom vanished in the postmodern world. The open frontier that Americans took for granted is long gone. The geographic expanses, and the freedom of our democracy, allow Americans who have no history, no sense of time, to make up for their deficiencies by squandering the room they found.

Turner was aware of the cost of the loss of the open space myth for the American.<sup>4</sup> Everything that every person who came to America wanted was jeopardized by the closing of the frontier. Without the expanses of open land, the opportunity that had made America different from Europe evaporated. Now the process was the same. It was more of what Europeans were experiencing back home. Now the only opportunities were in the cities, and the individual physical strength against the open, virgin, space, that had been the boon to the peasant American was no longer central to his success. Now gears shifted, but the American myth, the ideal American of guts and glory, did not.

Though the ideal might have been of strong individual man who conquered the west, the truth was that few had the ability to do so. Only twenty percent of the frontier's settlers remained in their new homes. The landscape was far more than they could handle. The myth did not

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<sup>4</sup> "...the nations won so vast a domain that its resources seemed illimitable and its society seemed able to throw off all its maladies by the very presence of these vast new spaces" (Turner 1920, 304).

"And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred yours of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history" (Turner 1920, 28).

match the reality. The idea of free land and opportunity beckoned those who would take a chance; many failed. They went back to their old homes, or to more hospitable surroundings, finding the edge of the envelope, the frontier, too demanding.

But how many have been able to succeed in that garish American way, once the frontier had proved a failure, or when the frontier was no longer an option? The common man is left with a progress he cannot participate in unless on the very profane level of dressing 'like a cowboy', the urban cowboy motif, or 'marking' his territory, as a dog or gang member does, for want of a deeper meaning to his worth than the price of a pack of Marlboros.

This lack of origins in a group of people of various backgrounds has made the American a lost soul without meaning.<sup>5</sup> Meaning is sought in profit oriented television or movies, in music or even art, but not in the internal story of sharing within the culture. The culture remains segmented, only cemented by a consumer myth of plenty, that is hologrammic in its service to real man.

### Reflections on Open Space

Turner voiced what Americans wanted to hear about themselves. American history—nationalism—western history. By the time Turner died 40 years later every major university in the US offered courses in Western American history. None had before Turner. This was a theme people wanted to hear.

But people do not want to hear about closed space. They want the reality of open space. They want it so much they created the mythic cowboy and western to satisfy this need. America's lure was room to roam. The west was the melting pot that made AMERICANS! When it became history, we made it myth, so it would live and sell forever. A myth cannot be physical, tied to the land. It must incorporate all space, be ethereal, so as to survive the times. But as we become more populated, as we become more urban, as the European ethos dissolves with non-European immigrants, our myth is cause for alarm.

We protect our yard with fences. A wild gunslinging America became fenced in, and now America goes wild again with guns, because

<sup>5</sup> "Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries, from him; it throws him back for ever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart" (Tocqueville 1961, 120).

there is no room. Americans are defined by space. We are many people living under one roof—held together by laws and lawyers only. The more crowded we get, the more tensions mount, the more we begin to resemble Yugoslavia, German neo-nazis, intolerance. This was what Turner feared. His nightmare was watching as industry changed our only ethos, free land, into a bought and paid for myth. Now we were a people United only to a fiction. And the lack of nationalistic pride today makes the United States of America a misnomer.

### Reflections on Closed Space

Turner had grown up in the open space of Wisconsin. He had watched it disappear. In his youth he saw the American Indian before they were institutionalized and dissipated, he saw schooners making their way across the continent and he saw “frontier justice” hanging from a tree.

But in 1893, numbers told him what he already knew. That open space was gone. The world of his youth had changed. I see his thesis as a lament but also as a window to the future. The hope that Americans would grow beyond physical barriers.

Today we each fight to hold on to our own space, we do not have time for the problems of others. “Everyone’s got problems. Deal with it.”

Try talking to your government office if your tax return is late, see what kind of human care and understanding you receive. When you are done call up a school for that personal touch: “Thank you for calling. Please use your touch tone phone for the following information . . . 1 for recorded information, 2 for registration, 3 for insanity . . . ” Too many people sharing too little space with too little time.

Turner said America had to change. And change we have, physically, but I question America’s mental condition. Turner wrote: “And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history” (Turner 1893). People like the idea of the frontier, but not the idea of losing it. Did the loss of physical space close us off to any open spaces? Did materialistic Americans assume that closed space meant no space at all, physically, mentally and spiritually? As an individual Turner looked beyond the physical and hoped to lead others there as well.

### Reflections on No Space

The conquering of the frontier altered the cultural landscape of man. What had been a multi-hued and individual landscape with surprises and beauty at every valley became national consensus pablum. Rich cultural nations of American natives were wasted in favor of the bland and the same . . . MacDonalds, Carl's Jr., Walmart . . . TV . . . and malls. Once inside any mall you could be in any city in the country. The individual essence of place . . . lost. No place . . . no space.

Our culture, fashion and architecture invade every corner of the earth. The few places our culture has not invaded are being fought over today, as relics in this western museum we've created. But still the popular myth of open land, the range, the wild west, the frontier lives in popular belief. The irony is the stifling myth lives and kills where the new frontiers await birth.

So what is an example of a new frontier? The loss of individual space is closely linked to population questions that Turner faced at the turn of the century. People long for open space even as they continue to add babies, doubling population every thirty years. Up to 1650 the population of the earth doubled every 1500 years. Then it doubled in 200 years. One billion people lived in 1850. Three billion lived in 1950, and today we approach 6 billion people. In less than 30 years we will have 11 billion people on this same earth. How can we honor each person then, when we cannot do it now? The highest birth rates are among the most undeveloped. The highest consumption among the wealthiest and most educated. No one wants to lessen what space they still have. So no one says or does anything. Turner was intimidated by this problem. Only occasionally did he address it publicly.<sup>6</sup> Few do today. No one said that subduing frontiers would be easy.

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<sup>6</sup> "It is the striking fact that at the end of the generation since 1890, when the Superintendent of the Census reported that the American frontier line could no longer be traced, a whole group of careful and reputable scholars have attempted to demonstrate quantitatively that before the year 2000, so great is the increase if population and so rapid the exhaustion of resources and such the diminishing production of food relative to population, our present standards of life must be abandoned or the birth rate decreased if we are not to feel the pressure of want and even of universal famine and war" (Turner 1924, as related in Wrobel, 1993).

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