

Culture and Inhabiting Everyday Landscape: What Can Artists Tell Architects About Shaping the Everyday Landscape?

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Experience of the landscape is integral to human cultures, and this experience is phenomenal, culturally subjective and evolving. Our visual culture is in flux, and so is our interpretation of the everyday landscape.

A resident of East Baltimore will experience North Avenue differently than the Inner Harbor tourist who is lost. The resident knows an invisible web of social activity associated with visible elements of the streetscape, and dwells in this social space. The displaced tourist sees the blank facades of row houses, has no local knowledge of this urban landscape, and relies on generic spatial readings for orientation.

An Apache descendent who grew up within view of the Sandia Mountain range has a different experience of that landscape than the newly transplanted resident of a contemporary housing development erected in the view shed of these mountains. While watching John Wayne's *The Cowboy*, the new resident recognizes the movie's backdrop mountain range. It matches the view from the patio of his new home. The western landscape of the movie is now a housing development, and he is dwelling within the celluloid space of John Wayne. These western landscapes are iconographic to the American culture, and exist in our collective consciousness perhaps more than as physical phenomena (figure 1).

Following the hypothesis that social reality is a constructed reality, the interpretation of landscape by artists and photographers contributes to the cultural understanding of the landscape, and forms the social space within which the architect is an operator.

The Production of Space and the Everyday Landscape

The concepts of Henri Lefebvre, articulated in *The Production of Space*, can be used to frame a connection between photographers, artists

and architects. *La production de l'espace* was not translated into English until 1991. Lefebvre posits that "(Social) space is a (social) product."¹ This is not evident to us because of the double illusions: the illusion of transparency, and the realistic illusion. Lefebvre credits the Bauhaus for locating "space in its real context" and developing "a new conception, a global concept, of space." Artists associated with the Bauhaus, such as Paul Klee, discovered that "Space opened up to perception, to conceptualization, just as it did to practical action. And the artist passed from objects in space to the concept of space itself." Relevant to our understanding of the everyday landscape is the third consequence cited by Lefebvre: "Global space established itself in the abstract as a void waiting to be filled, as a medium waiting to be colonized. How this could be done was a problem solved only later by the social practice of capitalism: eventually, however, this space would come to be filled by commercial images, signs and objects. This development would in turn result in the advent of the pseudo-concept of the environment."²

Our social space, filled with commercial images, signs and objects, has become the everyday landscape.



Figure 1. A Western Landscape, 2009.
Photograph by R. Connell

Photographers and the Everyday

Lewis Baltz is one of the first artists to photograph industrial structures and housing developments in the western landscape and in his work buildings become objectified. Baltz was a participant in the pivotal *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* exhibition at the George Eastman House in 1975. "The Tract Houses, 1969-71" was his first series. As Jeff Rian has observed, "Tract housing was born when the military-industrial complex was being geared towards a service-based-economy. Its underlying theme was commercial repetition."³ And "He exhibited what he called a 'forensic' approach to picture making, which was basically a form of documentary photography of things and places he found personally and visually relevant."⁴ In the view of this photographer, developer housing appears as somehow found; the structures appear as non-intentional works, almost non-human. Devoid of people and staging, the images are in opposition to promotional brochures or architectural journal presentations.

From the Industrial Parks series of 1974, the photograph "Von Karman Road, between Alton and McGraw Roads, Looking East"⁵ presents a frontal view of an industrial box that is without architectural ornament or symbolism. The buildings as seen in Baltz photographs are a stark assemblage of metal wall panels, wall coping, and the occasional door. The scene appears as a disturbed landscape taken over by weeds. Examples of variation in these photographs are the inclusion or exclusion of the curb of the road. The views are devoid of people, and are deliberate in straight-on alignments. "South Wall, Plast X, 350 Lear, Costa Mesa" is atypical in this series for its inclusion of signage on the building wall.

The images of Robert Adams are replete with the everyday landscape. "What We Brought" recorded streets, parking lots, ditches, and facades of Denver in the early 1970's. His photographs are a record of the everyday interior and exterior spaces of shops and homes.

William Christenberry has photographed vernacular structures and landscape of the southeastern U.S. Architectural subjects are most frequently viewed head-on, and without people. In the photograph, *Taylor's Place, near Greensboro, Alabama, 1974*,⁶ a small simple gable-roofed weathered wood-clad

structure appears studded with commercial signs. The structure is centered in the photo's aperture, in a 'forensic' and documentary manner similar reminiscent of Lewis Baltz. The signs are faded and rusted. Rough-cut grass appears to keep shrubbery and vines at bay, although a single shrub fills the central portal of the structure. The juxtaposition of signage and decaying wood feels emblematic of an everyday landscape from another time period.

Signage, freestanding or attached to building walls, is imbedded in the everyday landscape. Signs stand out in the Western terrain. The contrast to the seemingly natural landscape (but deceptively altered by people) in the west is stronger than in the more intensely developed landscapes of the eastern seaboard.

Service Station, Greensboro, Alabama, 1975, another image by Christenberry, presents the structure centered in the frame. A reading of the main sign of the service station is eclipsed because it is perpendicular to the picture plane. The image, to this reader, feels peaceful and calm, with the relative lack of color and signage. Also a painter and a sculptor, Christenberry has transformed images of the same structure across all three modes of expression. For example, *Green Warehouse (1978-79)*⁷, is a sculpture⁸, a series of photographs (*Green Warehouse, Newbern, Alabama, 1973 to 2004*)⁹, and also a painting (1998)¹⁰.

The contemporary work of photographer T Sweetman has recorded structures and signage, and their deterioration, concentrated in New Mexico and the southwest. A Sweetman photograph registers a fragile desert landscape at the moment of initial human alteration: the marks of heavy equipment scraped onto the surface, with the implied presence of the future tract homes.

These photographers have created art from the everyday landscape, observing human intervention, structures, or signage that is in juxtaposition to otherwise empty landscape. The photographer's selection of content and process of bracketing the scene, allow the viewer to see the ordinary more clearly.

Artists and the Everyday

In a similar way, other visual artists have altered our perception of the ordinary. Andy Warhol framed familiar twentieth century objects. Soup cans, Brillo Boxes, a myriad

selection of commercial products were co-opted as subject matter for his paintings. The movements of Pop Art, Photorealism and Hyperrealism followed in framing ordinary objects and the everyday landscape.

Edward Ruscha interpreted the everyday landscape throughout a long and prolific career as a visual artist, working in a variety of media, recording road architecture. Many of his early photographic projects appear documentary in nature: *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963; *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, 1971; *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966; *Thirty-four Parking Lots in Los Angeles*, 1967.¹¹

The images bring us to observe the vernacular built environment. In his renderings of words and phrases, we experience words and phrases lifted from the everyday context of stories and advertisements, and in a manner similar to his photographic work, we find ourselves observing the smallest detail.



Figure 2. Firestation No. 4, Courtesy Venturi Brown & Associates Inc.

Architects and the Everyday

Learning from Las Vegas, 1972,¹² was a landmark in American architecture culture. Venturi Scott Brown and other architects began to look at ordinary architecture, and design projects in a vernacular vocabulary. *Learning from Las Vegas* (LLV) validated looking at the everyday landscape. While Las Vegas is a specialized landscape, it represented the ordinary versus the academic, or “high style” architecture. Fire Station No. 4 in Columbus, Indiana, 1968, was an early rendition of the decorated shed concept, taken from the vernacular world (figure 2). Followed by Best

Products, Langhorne, Pennsylvania, 1978 and the Institute for Scientific Information, Philadelphia, 1979, these buildings used applied graphics as decorative devices with no pretense of continuing an architectural language of ornament integrated with architectural structure or function (figure 3). The ornamental graphics were applied directly to meet the purposes of ornament, similar to the application of signage and decoration in non-architect commercial environments.

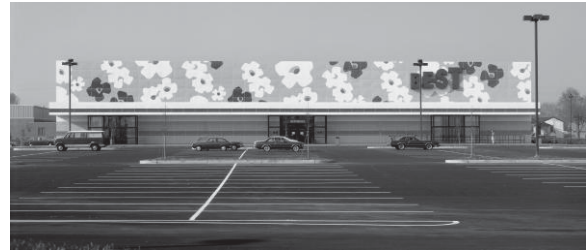


Figure 3. Best 07. Photograph by Tom Bernard.

Significance for Architects

The disparity between the language of high architecture that is studied and promulgated in the academy and the actual built environment is vast. In the United States, approximately 25% of buildings are designed by architects. Singling out the residential home market alone, 10% of homes are architect-designed.¹³

We are dwelling in space that is produced by socio-economic forces that have little to do with an academically-based architectural culture.

The production of images by photographers and artists create a cultural understanding of this environment. The images themselves fall into an art history with nuances and details that can only be understood by the viewer with an aesthetic judgment, a pure gaze, as postulated by Pierre Bourdieu, “This is not a separate realm removed from everyday life, but is part and parcel of an entire social condition.”¹⁴ The images are a type of cultural capital, and the reading of the images fits into Bourdieu’s interpretation of the role of social class and position in the consumption of art. The collective work contributes to our social reality under the under these rules of art.

The work of photographers and artists in interpreting the ordinary built environment and the everyday landscape is useful to architects to understand the reality, the social reality and the social space, that has been produced. The

early work of Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, and William Christenberry was contemporaneous with the acceptance of the ordinary by Venturi Scott Brown and other practicing architects. Architecture appreciation is similar to art appreciation in that different observers are processing what they see in different ways. Pierre Bourdieu gave insight to these differences in his precise sociological study of the experiences of art by different social classes in France. From this work, Bourdieu extrapolated that a small minority will view a work of art with an aesthetic gaze, or pure gaze. Much of architectural education goes to the development of the architectural aesthetic gaze. Established aesthetic canons, or aesthetic storylines, are elaborated in the universities. Photographers and other visual artists, while often operating within aesthetic storylines of their disciplines, are more able, more agile and flexible than architects to observe and integrate the current social space that has been produced into their images.

These artists and photographers have brought attention and insight to our cultural experience of the everyday landscape. Altering and illuminating our culturally-conditioned perception of our own cultural landscape in which we are imbedded is fundamental to our ability as architects to design in culturally sensitive and responsive ways.

Acknowledgements

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¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. (Chicago: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 1991), 26.

² Lefebvre.

³ Jeff Rian, *Lewis Baltz* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001) 7.

⁴ Rian, 6.

⁵ Lewis Baltz, *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California: Das neue Industriegelände in der Nahe von Irvine, Kalifornien* (Gottengen, Germany: Light Impressions, 1974).

⁶ William Christenberry, Foreword by Elizabeth Brown, Essays by Walter Hopps, Howard N. Fox, Andy Grundberg, *William Christenberry*, (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2006), Fig. 102

⁷ Christenberry, Fig. 51.

⁸ Christenberry rejects the use of the word model for his sculptures which are reminiscent of architectural models. From the essay by Howard N. Fox in *Christenberry*, page 191: "They are diminutive in scale, but as Christenberry emphatically points out, 'They are not models. They are recreations, like dreams.' The distinction is more than technical. A model ship or architectural model lays claim to objective accuracy that serves an illustrational or didactic purpose. Christenberry's constructions assert a rationally indefinable power, as if they were apparitions or manifestations."

⁹ Christenberry, Fig. 52.

¹⁰ Fig. 53.

¹¹ Mary Richards, *Ed Ruscha* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008).

¹² Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, and Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas – Revised Edition: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (London: The MIT Press, 1977).

¹³ Avi Friedman, "Developing Skills for Architects of Speculative Housing", *Journal of Architectural Education* 47 (1993), www.jstor.org/stable/1425227.

¹⁴ "Aesthetic response is based on developing an apparent level of disinterestedness, a pure gaze removed from the economic necessities of life. To possess it, and, perhaps more importantly, to demonstrate that one possesses it, is to be able to define oneself in terms of a certain distance from the practical exigencies of life." Michael Grenfell and Cheryl Hardy, *Art Rules: Pierre Bourdieu and the Visual Arts* (Paris: Berg Publishers, 2007) 44.