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Author:

[Riley, Robert B](#)

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Thoughts on the New Rural Landscape

Robert B. Riley

The rural landscape is changing rapidly and in ways that worry us. No intelligent observer of the landscape expects stability or even slow, gradual change out there. We realize that the rural landscape in the U.S. has been a story of rapid change: the development of a whole continent on mostly agricultural or extractive lines, within the two to three centuries during which agriculture itself, in all advanced countries, was rapidly changing and evolving.

But that is not what concerns us; I think most of us sense something different. It includes conversion of farmland to residences or for urban expansion, soil erosion and siltation, corporate farming (whatever that is), the draining and development of wetlands, and the proliferation of suburbia, exurbia, and second-homania. Although we expect change and accept it, or at least claim to, something about this change seems qualitatively and quantitatively different: the “countryside” seems to be disappearing.

No, that can't be! Or can it? I think what really concerns us is that the countryside just doesn't look like countryside is supposed to look, anymore. The

(Overheard in Urban barbershop.)

Naaah...I like country living. Man,

axe, plow, horse, and rifle have been displaced by the mobile home, propane tank, satellite dish, and pickup. The tractor tire garden out front is now an eight-year old Camaro or Trans-Am with a “for sale” sign on it.

Our response has been to attempt to slow change, or at least guide it. This usually takes some form of containing or concealing change to leave the look of what’s “always” been there.

The old rural landscape was not just a physical, social and economic phenomenon. It was a conceptual image, an unexamined, shared vision of the countryside. It was economically, socially, and visually organized around people living on the land and earning a living from the land, particularly through agriculture and some extractive land uses. Few people who didn’t live from the land lived on the land. It had a basic conceptual and hierarchical organization — city, town, village, hamlet, free-standing farmstead, and, finally, wild land. Economically, it was organized hierarchically and centrally as well, with functions and markets linked to settlements. Whether our vision of it was as sweet and nostalgic as that of Laura Ingalls Wilder or as ribald and offbeat as that of Carolyn Chute, it was a shared vision. Ironically, some of the same forces changing our countryside serve to perpetuate the image, such as Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* books and the Walton family flashing across millions of television screens.

Now that old landscape seems gone. Gone because of the petro-chemical revolution, the internal combustion engine (whether in tractor or automobile), universal electrical power, and universal electronic communications. The agricultural system and the agricultural landscape have changed. New crops have been introduced and regional crop patterns have changed. Productivity on some land rises while other, marginal land is

abandoned. People continue to emigrate from rural areas in most parts of the United States. But more than agriculture is changing out there.

In fact, a new landscape is just around the corner. The new landscape has a different purpose. It will work differently, and it will look different.

The landscape was never as simple as its image, of course. Hugh Raup’s “View from John Sanderson’s Farm,” for example, points out the changes and cycles that a New England landscape has gone through. Another interpretive summary of the new landscape is John Louv’s “The New Eden” in *America II*. Pierce Lewis coined the term Galactic City to describe a new urban form of city that can’t be understood at all in terms of the old city, but only in terms of itself, and noted its expansion into the countryside.¹

The new old rural landscape was a place where people worked on the land, earned their living on the land, and lived on that land. The new rural landscape is a residence and occasional workplace for people whose livelihood depends not at all upon the land per se.

More often, I convince myself that we’re seeing in our landscape a paradigm shift unprecedented since the rise of agriculture or of urbanism. The humanized nonurban landscape, throughout human history, has been almost completely shaped by people who worked and lived on that land (or, sometimes, by people who owned the land and by workers who lived off its profits). The new nonurban landscape, at least in the U.S., is being shaped largely by people to whom the rural landscape is nothing more or nothing less than an alternative residential location. Whether they be commuters, retirees, or desktop publishers earning a living from their den, they regard the

when I'm watching TV at night with a

rural landscape not as a productive system or a way of life but as a locational amenity.

Just as this is a new landscape being shaped by new forces, we increasingly find that institutions developed in the old landscape are inadequate or irrelevant in the new. For example, traditional forms of political organizations, as Louv and others have pointed out, are giving way to privatized systems — the county sheriff, for example, is being replaced or supplemented by private security systems, chain link fences, and dogs. Another example is the fact that so many landscape architects pin their hopes for guiding and shaping this new countryside rest upon the Soil Conservation Service, an institution that was, in fact, developed to solve very different problems in very different landscape systems.

Traditional concepts of city, town, village, hamlet, farmstead, and wild have little relevance to this new landscape and this new way of life. As Lewis observed, our habit of constantly trying to interpret the new landscape in terms of the old city is not only futile, but actively hinders understanding. The new landscape is one in which traditional concepts of central place and hierarchical organization are meaningless. It is a landscape, in Louv's phrase, of "buckshot urbanization."²

As designers, our major concern has not been in developing a new vision for a new landscape, but in saving the old. I do not say that the old is not worth saving. I do worry about the fact that it seems most of us have focused our thoughts on how we can accommodate some sort of change without destroying the visual character of the existing countryside, and paid little attention to what the new landscape wants to be.

If, in fact, the essence of the new countryside is as different as I think it is, and the forces developing it as powerful as I think

they are, how likely is it that we can somehow hide it, fit it in where it cannot be seen, confine it to nonproductive farmland, or in any other way sweep it under the rug? Not likely, I think.

Let me suggest a way of looking at the new and the old that might give us a little more intellectual, creative, and professional freedom. We tend to see the new landscape, in relation to the old, as seeping out of the city along the interstates and invading the weakest chinks of the old landscape, as if it were some disease. A more productive way of looking at the new and the old landscapes might be as two independent networks,

The traditional countryside can be understood in terms of sophisticated regional science or central place theory, theories of agricultural land use and rent, and so forth. Much of it is framed in the Jeffersonian grid, one of the most powerful human abstractions ever laid on the land. Think of the new landscape as a network based on entirely different motivations, economics, and sociology. It is a network with many fewer spatial and distance restrictions than the old network and, in fact, with electronic communications, about as aspatial as any spatial network could be. We have not developed any theoretical models for this network yet, as we developed theoretical, if not always very useful, models for the old. Such models will probably be vastly different, more complex, and less spatial than those for the old network.

One of the differences between the networks is that of order. Agricultural landscapes inevitably have a clear visual order, built from visual patterns, building materials of local origin (or a national order, in the case of the balloon frame), a settlement system of residences, service, and market towns, and transport routes. It is that order, and the contrapuntal variety within it, that leads us to describe landscapes like the Cotswolds as works of art.

six-pack, I wanna be able to walk

As to the new rural landscape, I offer three observations. First, it does not, cannot, and should not partake of any older rural order. Second, we do not yet know and cannot envision what this new landscape's order might be. Third, this new landscape, because it is so far less deterministic than an agricultural landscape, is likely to have an apparent (conventionally recognizable?) order only by design, whether or not that design comes from designers.

The new and the old landscapes are two inherently different networks that have to somehow coexist or find resolution on the same land. This concept is different not only from the metaphor of nasty residential development seeping out as a virus from the city and interstates but also Lewis' old city and new city. The galactic metropolis that Lewis sees surrounds, engulfs, and eventually transforms the old city. The new and the old rural landscape grids have no such clear, clean, and easy deterministic relation. Exploring the relation between them would be the next task after understanding more about the new network itself.

Where does this leave us in terms of understanding what this new composite landscape might look like? The first task, that of understanding the new landscape network on its own terms, suggests two needs to me. First of all, we need a new vocabulary. I have said that old categories such as town, village, hamlet, and farmstead, are no longer relevant. For example, what terms should the census bureau use to characterize this new landscape? I'm not knowledgeable enough to comment definitively, but it seems that "nonrural farm" is much too coarse-grained a category to make much sense of what's going on.

The second need is to analyze — not only conceptualizing but also describing and quantifying, observing and documenting — what is going on. Countless questions pop up. Are

there, for example, regional differences? Are patterns of the new landscape different in different parts of the country because of differences in prosperity? Does prosperity, in fact, spur physical expression of the new landscape? What are the demographics of the people who are building this new landscape grid on the land — are they young or old, retired or employed, rich or poor? Do land uses in various agricultural regions of the U.S. make a major difference in the physical expressions of the new landscape on the land? What difference do local tax structures and landholding practices make?

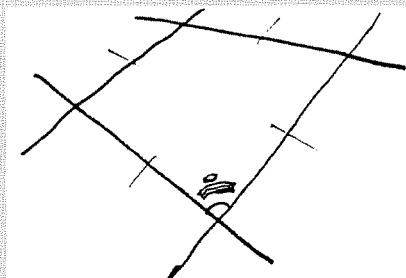
Most of all, as a designer pondering the form of this new landscape, I wonder what people seek there. What motivates people who move to the countryside, not to work on it, but solely to live on it and thereby create a new landscape? As a starting point, I can suggest some general questions to ask these people.

Some of the questions would explore reasons that have nothing to do with what we think of as landscape issues. There are all sorts of reasons that people might have for moving to the countryside that have little to do with the affective impact of a rural landscape as we understand it and study it. Easy travel, cheap land, permissive building codes (or none at all), tax structures, the absence of minorities in schools — all of these might be important considerations of only indirect connection to the landscape experience. They are important, but they are locational issues, in contrast to landscape issues.

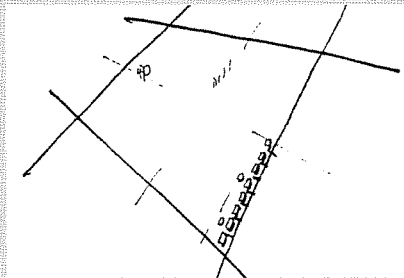
Obviously, another set of questions deals with whether and why people move to the countryside in search of a particular, what might we call it, landscape experience?

Before I suggest some questions, let me digress to talk about types of environments relevant to experiencing the rural

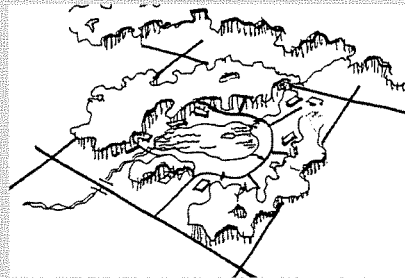
outside and piss off my deck without



NERD I



NERD II



NERD III

landscape from the new nonagricultural network. When we talk about overlaying new nonagricultural phenomena (such as houses) into the old grid, it seems to me there are three conceptually different ways this can happen. I crudely sketch these below as types of New Edenic Residential Development, or NERD I, II and III.

In I, the new house sits in the existing or old rural framework without really affecting it. An isolated house makes little visual impact on the existing landscape; indeed when one is in the house or next to it, all one sees is the traditional rural landscape. At the other extreme, III, the new residential development exists at a scale and with a pattern sufficient to create an environment, distinct from the old, which can be experienced totally in itself. In the Illinois flatlands, these developments, the amenity subdivisions that cluster along the stream corridors, are very different from the surrounding landscape. They are treed and curvilinear, versus the open and rectilinear of the existing landscape. This difference is not necessary. The new environment could either be similar or very different from the old. The point is that it is extensive and thorough enough to create its own environment.

I am particularly interested in II. We see a lot of this where I live, in central Illinois. I call it “septic-tank strip suburbia.” It commonly results when a farmer sells road-fronting land along one side of a farm. The pejorative way to understand this kind of development is that it ingeniously combines the worst of town and country living with the advantages of neither. The less judgmental way to describe it is that it affects, and to some extent vitiates, the landscape experience of the existing or traditional land pattern without being strong enough or extensive enough to substitute a pattern or environment of its own.

These conceptual qualities are related to the questions that we might ask new rural residents. Let me list some of these questions without making any attempt to refine them, group them conceptually, or worry about how they might be phrased or expressed in a questionnaire (remember that this is the class of questions that deals specifically with landscape experience):

What were the important factors in your decision to move to the countryside?

What environmental amenities (sorry about that phrase) were you seeking?

What about the landscape do you most like, now that you're here?

What about the landscape around you do you least like, now that you are here?

How do you feel about the old landscape around you (herbicide drifting into the kiddie pool)? Do you like it?

How do you feel about the new landscape around you, if applicable? In the case of inhabitants of septic-tank strip suburbia: What do you like about having neighbors on each side, and what do you dislike about that?

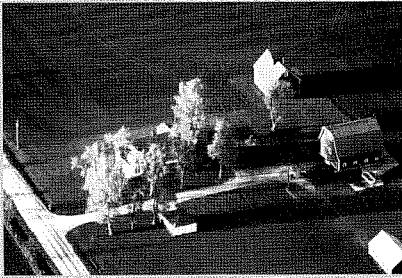
What would cause you to move from this place?

What would make this landscape to which you have come even better?

Are you “in the country”? If not, why not? If so, what makes it “country”? What would make it not “country” anymore?

The point of these questions is to learn something about what kind of landscape, if any, these new rural residents might be seeking. Basically, do they have a vision of landscape? I think it is important we learn about this for two reasons. First, if these people have a landscape vision, it might not be one that

worrying about any damn neighbors.



THE TRADITION . . .



NERD II



NERD III

we approve of or even understand. Their vision of the countryside might be very different from ours as designers, planners, or public officials. If so, we should know it.

On the other hand, if we understand what these people are looking for, it might enable us to find design forms for it and to turn our attention not to minimizing the presence of the new landscape in the countryside, but to expressing it as itself, for itself, in some sort of landscape vision.

Understanding a vision for the new landscape, we might be able to go beyond trying to preserve the character of the old, to envision ways in which both the old and the new landscape can have physical expressions that do not destroy one another, but co-exist with, or even complement, one another. Is it naive to think that as designers and planners of the rural landscape we could develop such a vision? I do not think so. Whatever we think of suburbia, there was in the nineteenth century a moving and powerful vision among designers of what suburbia might and should be. Whatever we think of the emptiness of the City Beautiful, it also had a powerful visual and physical image.

If the idea of the new rural landscape is as powerful, as different, as important as I think it is, it deserves such an image and it would be worthwhile to work on. Surely our countryside deserves more than hiding a new landscape, confining it to non-productive farmland, or giving it curved streets with names from Walter Scott novels in whatever 1/4-1/4-1/4 section a farmer is willing to sell. Is it naive to think that such an image might make a real difference in the shape and working of our countryside? Maybe. But that does not mean it is not worth trying.

How do we begin? First by using our eyes to see what is out there, what exactly sits on the land and where. Edge City might be a more illuminating phrase than urban sprawl for

current trends, but it remains an easy categorization that short circuits observation and reflection.

Second, we need to consider why what is there is there. This requires a deep sense of local and regional history, a knowledge of the landscape a complex, evolving artifact, a particular and peculiar place expression of larger social and cultural trends. Regional landscapes are understandable only as combinations of the local and the global, the *genus loci* and *zeitgeist*. Regional and local history is out of fashion. It conjures up images of cardigan-clad antiquarians, or naive New Deal populism. But intelligent planning requires this history. Who teaches this? Must each of us learn it on our own?

Third, because the new rural landscape is created largely by new people moving into the countryside, we must understand what they seek, their ideal landscape. When we add a knowledge of the constraints, both regional and cultural, within which both choice and design must operate, maybe, as designers and planners, we can assemble a new vision for that landscape.

Notes

1. Hugh M. Raup, "The View from John Sanderson's Farm," *Forest History* (April, 1966); Richard Louv, *America II* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983); Pierce Lewis, "The Unprecedented City," *The American Land* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979); Pierce Lewis, "The Urban Invasion of the Rural Northeast," in *National Rural Studies Committee Proceedings* (Cornallis, OR: Western Rural Development Center, 1991).
2. Ray Raphael, *Cash Crop: An American Dream* (Mendocino, CA: Ridge Times Press, 1985).

Photos and drawings courtesy Robert B. Riley.