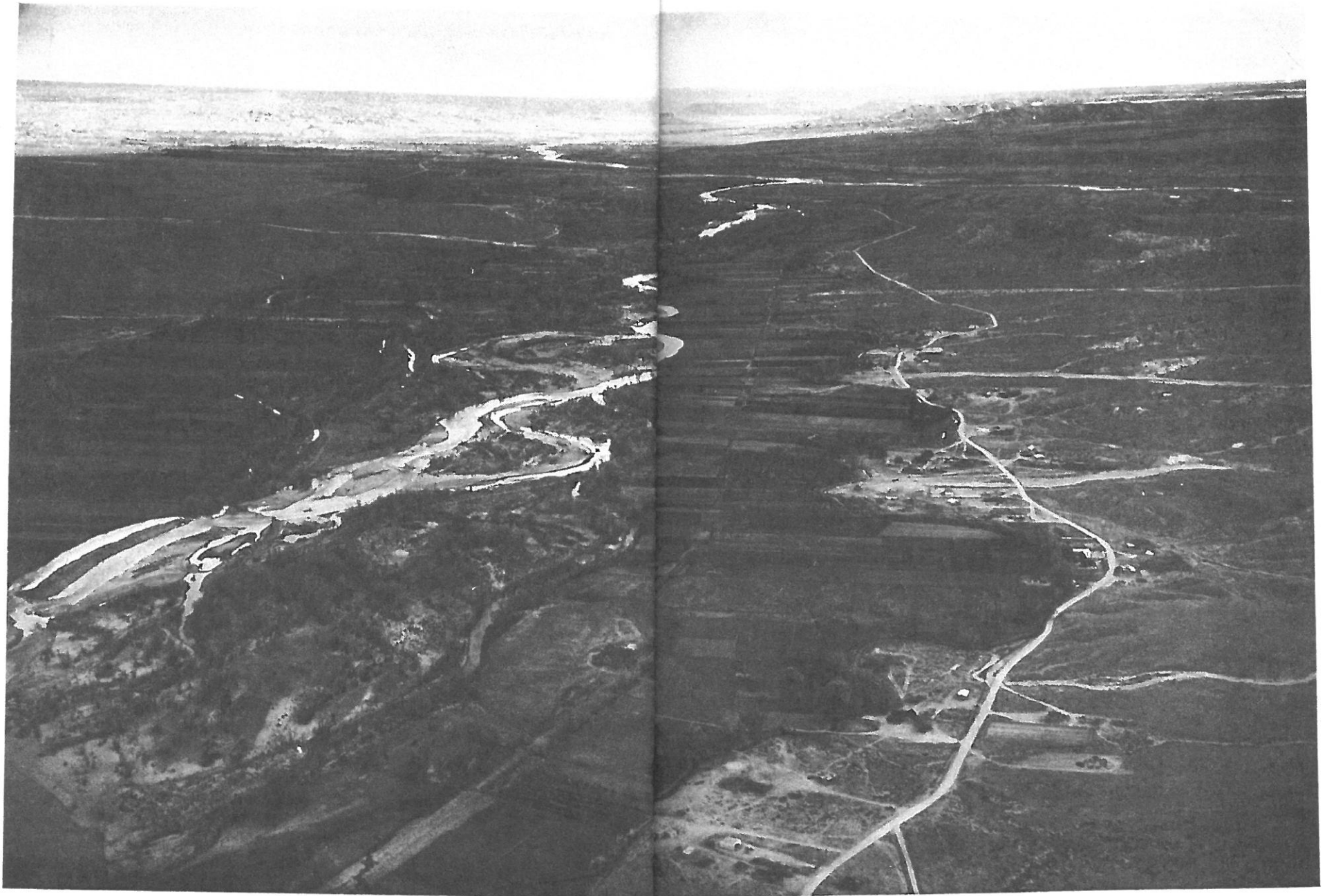


J.B. Jackson / Discovering the vernacular landscape. 1984.
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The Word Itself



Why is it, I wonder, that we have trouble agreeing on the meaning of *landscape*? The word is simple enough, and it refers to something which we think we understand; and yet to each of us it seems to mean something different.

What we need is a new definition. The one we find in most dictionaries is more than three hundred years old and was drawn up for artists. It tells us that a landscape is a "portion of land which the eye can comprehend at a glance." Actually when it was first introduced (or reintroduced) into English it did not mean the view itself, it meant a *picture* of it, an artist's interpretation. It was his task to take the forms and colors and spaces in front of him—mountains, river, forest, fields, and so on—and compose them so that they made a work of art.

There is no need to tell in detail how the word gradually changed in meaning. First it meant a picture of a view; then the view itself. We went into the country and discovered beautiful views, always remembering the criteria of landscape beauty as established by critics and artists. Finally, on a modest scale, we undertook to make over a piece of ground so that it resembled a pastoral landscape in the shape of a garden or park. Just as the painter used his judgment as to what to include or omit in his composition, the landscape gardener (as he was known in the eighteenth century) took pains to produce a stylized "picturesque" landscape, leaving out the muddy roads, the plowed fields, the squalid villages of the real countryside and including certain agreeable natural features: brooks and groves of trees and smooth expanses of grass. The results were often extremely beautiful, but they were still pictures, though in three dimensions.

The reliance on the artist's point of view and his definition of landscape beauty persisted throughout the nineteenth century. Olmsted and his followers designed their parks and gardens in "painterly" terms. "Although three-dimensional composition in landscape materials differs from two-dimensional landscape painting, because a garden or park design contains a *series* of pictorial compositions," the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (13th edition) informs us, ". . . nevertheless in each of these pictures we find the familiar basic principles of unity, of repetition, of sequence and balance, of harmony and contrast." But within the last half century a revolution has taken place: landscape design and landscape painting have gone their separate ways. Landscape architects no longer turn to Poussin or Salvator Rosa or Gilpin for inspiration; they may not even have heard of their work. Knowledge of ecology and conservation and environmental psychology are now part of the landscape architect's professional background, and protecting and "managing" the natural environment are seen as more important than the designing of picturesque parks. Environmental designers, I have noticed, avoid the word *landscape* and prefer *land* or *terrain* or *environment* or even *space* when

Rio Grande Valley north of Santa Fe. Seen from the air, the difference between the two landscapes is most marked. (Photo: Laura Gilpin)

they have a specific site in mind. *Landscape* is used for suggesting the esthetic quality of the wider countryside.

As for painters, they have long since lost interest in producing conventional landscapes. Kenneth Clark, in his book *Landscape into Painting*, comments on this fact. "The microscope and telescope have so greatly enlarged the range of our vision," he writes, "that the snug, sensible nature which we can see with our own eyes has ceased to satisfy our imaginations. We know that by our new standards of measurement the most extensive landscape is practically the same as the hole through which the burrowing ant escapes from our sight."¹

This does not strike me as a very satisfactory explanation of the demise of traditional landscape painting. More than a change in scale was responsible. Painters have learned to see the environment in a new and more subjective manner: as a different kind of experience. But that is not the point. The point is, the two disciplines which once had a monopoly on the word—landscape architecture and landscape painting—have ceased to use it the way they did a few decades ago, and it has now reverted as it were to the public domain.

What has happened to the word in the meantime? For one thing we are using it with much more freedom. We no longer bother with its literal meaning—which I will come to later—and we have coined a number of words similar to it: roadscape, townscape, cityscape, as if the syllable *scape* meant a space, which it does not; and we speak of the wilderness landscape, the lunar landscape, even of the landscape at the bottom of the ocean. Furthermore the word is frequently used in critical writing as a kind of metaphor. Thus we find mention of the "landscape of a poet's images," "the landscape of dreams," or "landscape as antagonist" or "the landscape of thought," or, on quite a different level, the "political landscape of the NATO conference," the "patronage landscape." Our first reaction to these usages is that they are farfetched and pretentious. Yet they remind us of an important truth: that we always need a word or phrase to indicate a kind of environment or setting which can give vividness to a thought or event or relationship; a background placing it in the world. In this sense *landscape* serves the same useful purpose as do the words *climate* or *atmosphere*, used metaphorically. In fact *landscape* when used as a painter's term often meant "all that part of a picture which is not of the body or argument"—like the stormy array of clouds in a battle scene or the glimpse of the Capitol in a presidential portrait. In the eighteenth century, *landscape* indicated scenery in the theater and had the function of discreetly suggesting the location of the action or perhaps the time of day. As I have suggested elsewhere, there is no better indication of how our relation to the environment can change over the centuries than in the role of stage scenery. Three hundred years ago Corneille could write a five-act tragedy with a single indication of the setting: "The action takes place

in the palace of the king." If we glance at the work of a modern playwright we will probably find one detailed description of a scene after another, and the ultimate in this kind of landscape, I suppose, is the contemporary movie. Here the set does much more than merely identify the time and place and establish the mood. By means of shifts in lighting and sound and perspective the set actually creates the players, identifies them, and tells them what to do: a good example of environmental determinism.

But these scenic devices and theater landscapes are mere imitations of real ones: easily understood by almost everyone, and shared. What I object to is the fallacy in the metaphorical use of the word. No one denies that as our thoughts become complex and abstract we need metaphors to give them a degree of reality. No one denies that as we become uncertain of our status we need more and more reenforcement from our environment. But we should not use the word *landscape* to describe our private world, our private microcosm, and for a simple reason: a landscape is a concrete, three-dimensional shared reality.

Lands and Shapes

Landscape is a space on the surface of the earth; intuitively we know that it is a space with a degree of permanence, with its own distinct character, either topographical or cultural, and above all a space shared by a group of people; and when we go beyond the dictionary definition of landscape and examine the word itself we find that our intuition is correct.

Landscape is a compound, and its components hark back to that ancient Indo-European idiom, brought out of Asia by migrating peoples thousands of years ago, that became the basis of almost all modern European languages—Latin and Celtic and Germanic and Slavic and Greek. The word was introduced into Britain sometime after the fifth century A.D. by the Angles and Saxons and Jutes and Danes and other groups of Germanic speech. In addition to its Old English variations—*landskipe*, *landscæf*, and others—there is the German *landschaft*, the Dutch *landscap*, as well as Danish and Swedish equivalents. They all come from the same roots, but they are not always used in the English sense. A German *landschaft*, for instance, can sometimes be a small administrative unit, corresponding in size to our ward. I have the feeling that there is evolving a slight but noticeable difference between the way we Americans use the word and the way the English do. We tend to think that *landscape* can mean natural scenery only, whereas in England a landscape almost always contains a human element.

The equivalent word in Latin languages derives in almost every case from the Latin *pagus*—meaning a defined rural district. The French, in fact, have several words for *landscape*, each with shades of meaning: *terroir*, *pays*,

paysage, campagne. In England the distinction was once made between two kinds of landscape: woodland and champion—the latter deriving from the French *champagne*, meaning a countryside of fields.

That first syllable, *land*, has had a varied career. By the time it reached England it signified *earth* and *soil* as well as a portion of the surface of the globe. But a much earlier Gothic meaning was *plowed field*. Grimm's monumental dictionary of the German language says that "*land* originally signified the plot of ground or the furrows in a field that were annually rotated" or redistributed. We can assume that in the Dark Ages the most common use of the word indicated any well-defined portion of the earth's surface. A small farm plot was a land, and so was a sovereign territory like England or Scotland; any area with recognized boundaries was a land. Despite almost two thousand years of reinterpretation by geographers and poets and ecologists, *land* in American law remains stubbornly true to that ancient meaning: "any definite site regarded as a portion of the earth's surface, and extending in both vertical directions as defined by law" (italics added).

Perhaps because of this definition farmers think of land not only in terms of soil and topography but in terms of spatial measurements, as a defined portion of a wider area. In the American South, and in England too, a "land" is a subdivision of a field, a broad row made by plowing or mowing, and horse-drawn mowers were once advertised as "making a land of so-and-so many feet." In Yorkshire the reapers of wheat take a "land" (generally six feet wide) and go down the length of the field. "A woman," says the *English Dialect Dictionary*, "would thus reap half an acre a day and a man an acre." In his book on English field systems, Gray mentions a typical medieval village where the two large, open fields "consisted of about two thousand long narrow 'lands' or selions [furrows] each containing usually from one fourth of an acre to an acre."²

This is very confusing, and even more confusing is the fact that to this day in Scotland a *land* means a building divided into houses or flats. I confess that I find this particular use of the word hard to decipher, except that in Gaelic the word *lann* means an enclosed space. Finally, here is an example—if it can be called that—of *land* meaning both a fraction of a larger space and an enclosed space: infantrymen know that a land is an interval between the grooves of a rifle bore.

I need not press the point. As far back as we can trace the word, *land* meant a defined space, one with boundaries, though not necessarily one with fences or walls. The word has so many derivative meanings that it rivals in ambiguity the word *landscape*. Three centuries ago it was still being used in everyday speech to signify a fraction of plowed ground no larger than a quarter acre, then to signify an expanse of village holdings, as in grassland or woodland, and then finally to signify England itself—the largest space any Englishman of those days could imagine; in short, a remarkably versatile word, but always

implying a space defined by people, and one that could be described in legal terms.

This brings us to that second syllable: *scape*. It is essentially the same as *shape*, except that it once meant a composition of *similar* objects, as when we speak of a fellowship or a membership. The meaning is clearer in a related word: *sheaf*—a bundle or collection of similar stalks or plants. Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, seems to have contained several compound words using the second syllable—*scape* or its equivalent—to indicate collective aspects of the environment. It is much as if the words had been coined when people began to see the complexities of the man-made world. Thus *housescape* meant what we would now call a household, and a word of the same sort which we still use—*township*—once meant a collection of "tuns" or farmsteads.

Taken apart in this manner, *landscape* appears to be an easily understood word: a collection of lands. But both syllables once had several distinct, now forgotten meanings, and this should alert us to the fact that familiar monosyllables in English—house, town, land, field, home—can be very shifty despite their countrified sound. *Scape* is an instance. An English document of the tenth century mentions the destruction of what it called a "waterscape." What could that have been? We might logically suppose that it was the liquid equivalent of a landscape, an ornamental arrangement, perhaps, of ponds and brooks and waterfalls, the creation of some Anglo-Saxon predecessor of Olmsted's. But it was actually something entirely different. The waterscape in question was a system of pipes and drains and aqueducts serving a residence and a mill.

From this piece of information we can learn two things. First, that our Dark Age forebears possessed skills which we probably did not credit them with, and second, that the word *scape* could also indicate something like an organization or a system. And why not? If *housescape* meant the organization of the personnel of a house, if *township* eventually came to mean an administrative unit, then *landscape* could well have meant something like an organization, a system of rural farm spaces. At all events it is clear that a thousand years ago the word had nothing to do with scenery or the depiction of scenery.

We pull up the word *landscape* by its Indo-European roots in an attempt to gain some insight into its basic meaning, and at first glance the results seem disappointing. Aside from the fact that as originally used the word dealt only with a small fraction of the rural environment, it seems to contain not a hint of the esthetic and emotional associations which the word still has for us. Little is to be gained by searching for some etymological link between our own rich landscape and the small cluster of plowed fields of more than a thousand years ago.

Nevertheless the formula *landscape as a composition of man-made spaces on the land* is more significant than it first appears, for if it does not provide us with

a definition it throws a revealing light on the origin of the concept. For it says that a landscape is not a natural feature of the environment but a *synthetic* space, a man-made system of spaces superimposed on the face of the land, functioning and evolving not according to natural laws but to serve a community—for the collective character of the landscape is one thing that all generations and all points of view have agreed upon. A landscape is thus a space deliberately created to speed up or slow down the process of nature. As Eliade expresses it, it represents man taking upon himself the role of time.

A very successful undertaking on the whole, and the proof, paradoxically enough, is that many if not most of these synthetic organizations of space have been so well assimilated into the natural environment that they are indistinguishable and unrecognized for what they are. The reclamation of Holland, of the Fens, of large portions of the Po Valley are familiar examples of a topographical intervention producing new landscapes. Less well known are the synthetic landscapes produced simply by spatial reorganization. Historians are said to be blind to the spatial dimension of history, which is probably why we hear so little about the wholesale making of agricultural landscapes throughout seventeenth-century Europe.

It is not a coincidence that much of this landscape creation took place during a period when the greatest gardens and parks and the most magnificent of city complexes were being designed. A narrow and pedantic taxonomy has persuaded us that there is little or nothing in common between what used to be called civil engineering and garden or landscape architecture, but in fact from an historical perspective their more successful accomplishments are identical in result. The two professions may work for different patrons, but they both reorganize space for human needs, both produce works of art in the truest sense of the term. In the contemporary world it is by recognizing this similarity of purpose that we will eventually formulate a new definition of *landscape*: a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence; and if *background* seems inappropriately modest we should remember that in our modern use of the word it means that which underscores not only our identity and presence, but also our history.

It is not for me to attempt to elaborate on this new definition. My contribution would in any event be peripheral, for my interest in the topic is confined to trying to see how certain organizations of space can be identified with certain social and religious attitudes, especially here in America. This is not a new approach, for it has long been common among architectural and landscape architectural historians; and it leaves many important aspects of the contemporary landscape and contemporary city entirely unexplored. But it has the virtue of including the visual experience of our everyday world and of allowing me to remain loyal to that old-fashioned but surprisingly persistent definition of *landscape*: "A portion of the earth's surface that can be comprehended at a glance."