

Advertising Washington's State: The Idealization of a Northwest Landscape

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INTRODUCTION

The intent of this paper is to present a view of the Northwest landscape from the perspective of travel advertising. It uses specific market surveys, environment attribute analysis, and strategic tourist advertising of Washington to gain insights into how the American consumer perceives the Northwest—what environmental characteristics they prefer and what positive physical qualities they associate with this region. From these insights, a congruent strategy for architectural intervention is derived.

Travel advertising was chosen as a viable source of information about preferred environments as its primary purpose is to portray an idealized perception of a particular place. Studies show that tourists tend to travel to destinations which they believe provide more optimal conditions than they find at home. Hanspeter Schmidhausen, in the book *Tourism, Marketing, and Management*, states that a primary function of leisure travel is “to compensate for many deficits that everyday life in a work performance society inevitably brings.”¹ Travel advertising responds to this search for a more idealized environment by conveying destination images that elucidate these improved environmental qualities. Advertising imagery illustrates how products (whether they be a place, or consumer good) are linked “symbolically to the whole world of social values”² states Andrew Wernick. Marshall McLuhan, in his book *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, notes that the primary intent of advertising “is to manifest the product as an integral part of large social purposes and processes.”³ Furthermore, travel advertising provides a *concentrated* source of information about these qualities. As Sidney Levy in his book *Promotional Behavior* states, the potency or effectiveness of an ad campaign is dependent on the successful “amplification”⁴ of those product attributes which are deemed critical to the consumer.

The work which follows uses the specific study of Washington travel advertising imagery to begin to understand the product or destination attributes of Washington's State—how has Washington's environment been promoted and what do consumers prefer in a Washington environment?

Utilizing three techniques of image analysis—*image mapping, association imagery and advertising recall*—a series of environmental characteristics (desirable place qualities) have been isolated.

IMAGE MAPPING

Travel guide covers published between 1888 and 1994 were surveyed using a technique called image mapping. With the exception of a publication by the Union Pacific Railroad in 1893 entitled *The Resources and Attractions of Washington for the Home Seeker, Capitalist and Tourist*, all documents were published by state government agencies rather than private enterprise. The Union Pacific publication was included as its intent was similar to the other surveyed publications. Both the railroad and state publications were chosen as they offered a view of Washington which was meant to be nondiscriminatory—their intention was to portray attributes of the entire state versus bias certain areas. Only cover images were analyzed as it was found that they represent the most conclusive image of the document. Studies by Ruari McLean show that cover image selection is the most carefully considered, most highly researched image decision in publication design. Its purpose is to both encapsulate and “advertise”⁵ the publication contents. Roy Paul Nelson, in his book *Publication Design*, concurs with this statement and notes that “no feature is as important to a magazine/promotional brochure as its cover, no matter how it is circulated.”⁶ The cover image identifies the contents, attracts attention, creates a suitable mood for the reader, and “sells” the publication.

Each cover was scanned using a high resolution digital planimeter to determine characteristic hierarchy—what are the trend percentages of sky, water, earth (rock), vegetation, constructed objects (buildings, infrastructure, roads), humans and wildlife over the 106-year time span. Table 1, a compendium of all features and percentages, shows the relational hierarchy of the characteristics. The analysis revealed certain physical qualities as more dominant in cover imagery than others.

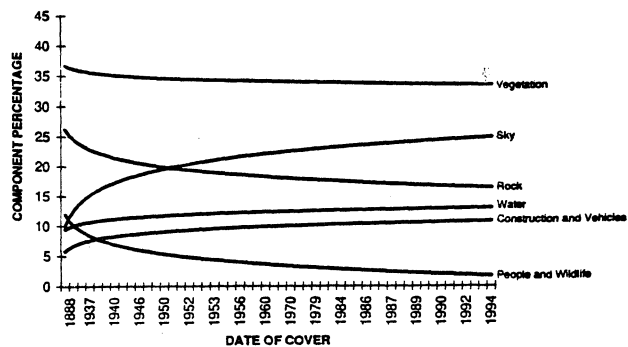


Table 1. Trendline Analysis of Cover Characteristics 1888-1994.

Vegetation. Averaging percentages over the span of the study, vegetation was the most frequent characteristic in the images at 34.15%. Vegetal type was dominated by coniferous trees (Fig. 1). When deciduous trees are shown, they are in full leaf, some with fruit. Ground cover and shrubbery is less common than tree cover. Vegetation was shown primarily in a randomly planted pattern with a rare exception being the wheat fields of eastern Washington or fields of baled hay. Sky. The next most common feature was the sky at 21.5% of the image. Predominately shown as clear and blue, occasionally scattered white clouds are included. The earth-sky profile was usually uninterrupted by constructed objects. Earth (Rock). Following sky, barren rock's average area was 18.56% of the cover image. Often covered with snow and ice, the contour gradient of the rock was, as a rule, severe (Fig. 1). More gentle topography, such as rolling hills, is rare with flat lands never included.

Water. Water's average coverage was 12.22% of the study sample. Shown as relatively calm and smooth, its edges were shown as irregular (Fig. 1). Rarely was water shown with a constructed edge. There were a limited number of cases where water was shown in motion—surf, waterfalls, rapids.

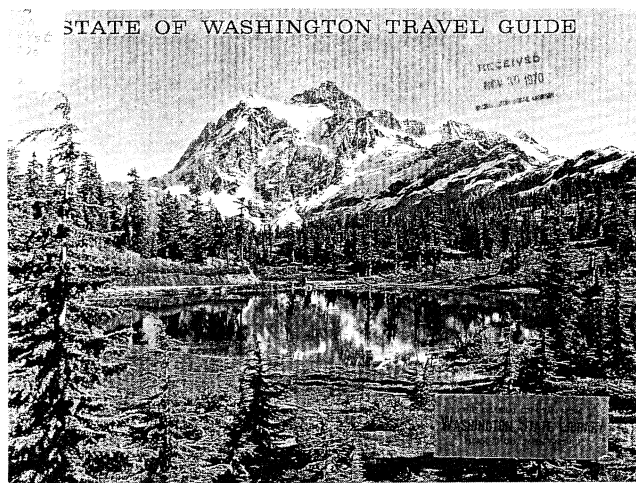


Fig. 1. This quintessential cover image shows the average percentages of vegetation, rock, water and sky found on travel guide covers (*State of Washington Travel Guide*), 1970.

Constructions and Vehicles. Of the remaining 13.57%, only 8.84% is devoted to construction and .87% to vehicles. This includes buildings, roads, dams, bridges, cars, and water craft.

When buildings were included, they were usually shown in

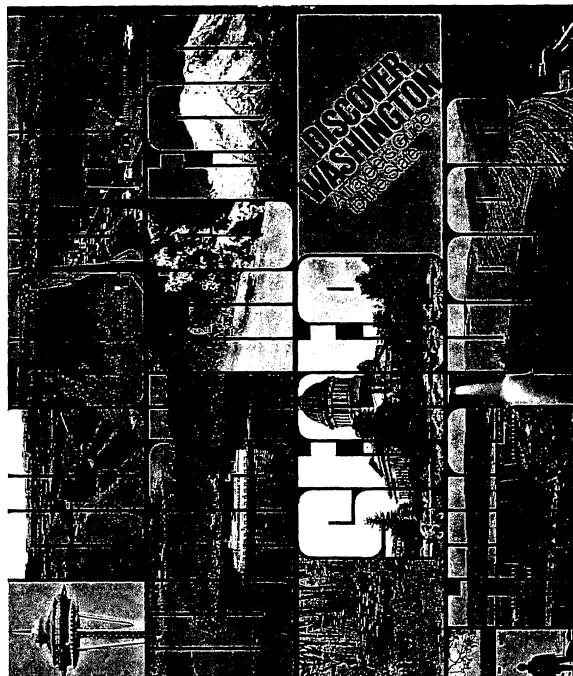


Fig. 2. Buildings are generally shown in isolation (*Discover Washington: A Traveler's Guide to the State*), 1979.

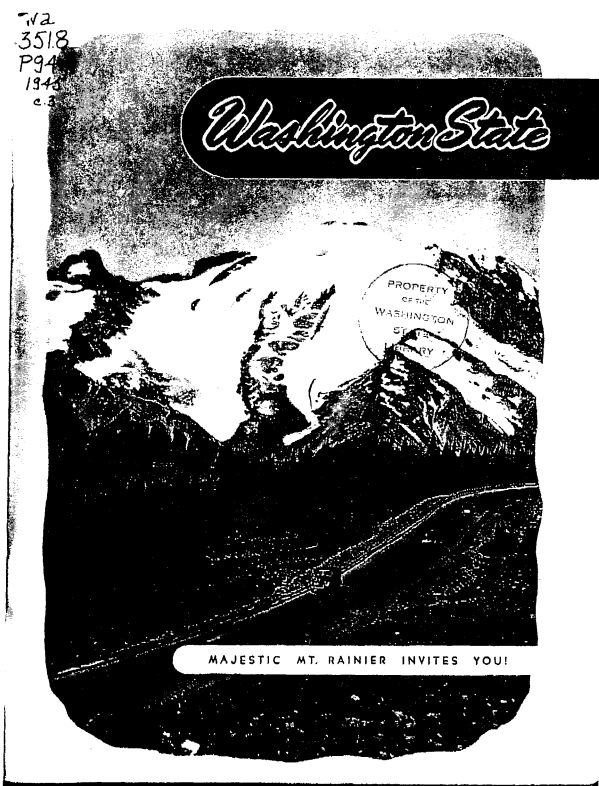


Fig. 3. Automobiles and roadways were more common on covers in the 1940's and 1950's (*Washington State*), 1945.

isolation and/or in the background—a lodge in the wilderness, a farmhouse or barn amid fields, or the Space Needle or state capital standing alone (Fig. 2). During a span of 30 years, from 1942 to 1973, no buildings were shown on tour guide covers. Only in the 1990's have building collections (groupings) begun to be brought to the foreground. It should be noted, however, that even when buildings are brought to the foreground that wilderness (forest, waterway or mountain) is shown in close proximity. It is only in rare cases that buildings are shown without wilderness elements in the image.

In the 1940's and 1950's, infrastructure (dams, roads, bridges) and cars were more common in the cover images (Fig. 3). From the 1960's to date, roads and automobiles are rarely shown and large civic projects have disappeared. One



Fig. 4. Viewing the wilderness. "Let's Go to Washington State," 1951.



Fig. 5. Plowing a field. The New Empire: Oregon, Washington, Idaho, 1888.

transportation exception is the continued inclusion of water craft such as sailboats and ferries.

People and Wildlife. At averages of 3.41% and .54% of the cover image, respectively, people and wildlife are portrayed as subordinate to the other features. Domesticated and wild animals are rarely seen. Only prior to 1938 do you see horses and cows. When people are shown on a cover, they are found "enjoying" some wilderness context—gazing at a mountain (Fig. 4), riding horses, reclining by a beach fire, swimming, canoeing or fishing. An exception is the 1983-84 cover where you see humans at leisure in a constructed environment, be it restaurant, hotel lounge, or water slide. The only example of a human at work was seen on the 1888 cover (Fig. 5) where an individual was seen plowing a field.

This worker image is in dramatic contrast to the more recreational settings previously mentioned. Here the target market was "settlers," who were assumed to be more interested in the pragmatic, qualities of landscape (fertile soil, abundant water and mild climate) than the leisure traveler. The booklet, in fact, boldly describes its target market:

Who should come—all honest, industrious people who desire a location for active work, where the changes are largely in favor of their success, are invited to come to 'The New Empire.' Impatient and fault-finding persons, and especially lazy people and tramps are not welcome. The field is especially good for men of capital and brains.⁷

This is in contrast to "who is coming" to Washington in 1990's. The demographic profile of a typical Washington traveler in 1990 is a California male, 36-45, who has a bachelor's degree, earns approximately \$38,000/year and travels to Washington with their spouse to enjoy the scenery.

ASSOCIATION IMAGING

The second image analysis strategy used market survey techniques to determine what physical characteristics were most associated with Washington state. A survey, done in 1985 by Ragatz Associates at the request of the Washington State Legislature Budget Committee, collected data by random phone, intercept, and mailed surveys. Information was also collected through surveys at hotels, motels, and commercial campgrounds and other private sector accommodations. All respondents were asked to indicate how frequently a series of "descriptors"⁸ came to mind when thinking about Washington.

The list included mountains, waterways, seafood, outdoor recreations, rain, friendly people, family recreation, small towns, cosmopolitan cities, historic attractions, culture, snow, and wine. The most common image association with Washington was found to be mountains and waterways (80% of respondents). Seafood and outdoors recreation followed with approximately 65%. Rain, which was included to assess the relative importance of this image for visitors, frequently came to mind for 58% of respondents.

Small towns (41%), cosmopolitan cities (34%), and historic attractions (31%) were mid-range. Culture (21%), snow (20%) and wine (13%) were the least frequent images associated with Washington.

Another survey, done in 1990 by the Gilmore Research Group, queried travelers about their *impressions* of Washington state—what was their first impression of the state and did they have any other images that came to mind. The most common image of Washington, regardless of traveler type, was *outdoor scenery*. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of Americans interviewed chose outdoor scenery as their first impression of Washington. Within the category of outdoor scenery, people most often associated forests and greenery at 35% of the respondents followed by scenic mountains at 27%. The second most common impression of Washington was a negative one—bad weather. One-quarter (24%) of American respondents mentioned bad weather, of which 17% mentioned rain. Cities and agriculture followed with 22% and 21%, respectively. A negative perception regarding cities was noted as travelers felt that “additional crowds and ‘urban sprawl’ may interfere with an ideal vacation in the state.”⁹ Outdoor activities, such as hiking, camping, fishing and hunting followed cities and agriculture with 11%. Clean air and general cleanness was mentioned by 5% of the U.S. respondents.

Cover tests which requested respondents to choose a travel guide cover which most accurately “depicts a scene reminiscent and unique to Washington”¹⁰ were also undertaken. The findings of one study indicated that none of the cover options were successful in depicting Washington. Responses to the three options—a fisherman on a lake, a lush forest scene, and a man and child on horseback riding in the mountains, included the following: the “fisherman on a lake” cover—“Yeah, it could be Washington, but it reminds me of Lake Tahoe.” To many, the lake “could be anywhere.”¹¹ The “lush forest scene” people—mentioned Oregon, the Redwoods, Northern California. The “horseback rider” and surrounding country reminded respondents of Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, or “Marlboro Country.”¹²

Another study done in 1990 asked participants to react to 7 different travel guide covers in terms of overall appeal (like most), image of Washington (most like their idea of Washington), eye appeal (likely to pick off magazine stand) and interest in travel to Washington (most likely to increase). The overall cover winner was titled *Mountain View* (Fig. 6). Comments included “most ‘typical’ of visitors/non-visitor image of Washington; very appealing photograph—communicates ‘magnificence of Washington’; eye-catching cover—many would be likely to pick it up off the magazine stand; most apt to increase traveler’s interest in visiting the state.”¹³

Other images, which included “Beach Driftwood, Boating in Eastern Washington, Umbrella at Marina, Flower Stall, Gourmet Meal, and Deciduous Forest,” were perceived to not be associated with Washington state. “Beach Driftwood and Boating in Eastern Washington” were seen as not typical of Washington. The Eastern Washington image

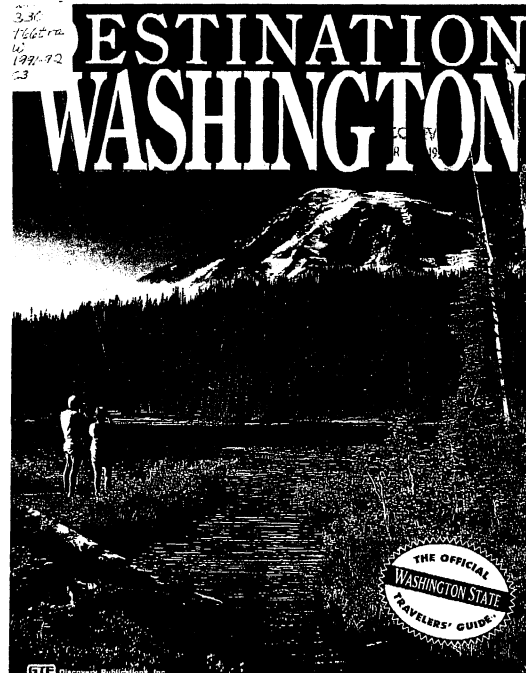


Fig. 6. “Most typical image of Washington,” *Destination Washington*, 1991.

was more suggestive of California than Washington—“too dry, not green, hills not mountains.”¹⁴ “Umbrella at Marina, the Flower Stall and Deciduous Forest” were judged as “not suggestive of Washington and could be anywhere.”¹⁵ “Gourmet Meal” was considered more suggestive of a gourmet dining magazine than travel or tourism and appeared to be too “limiting” for an image of Washington.

ADVERTISING RECALL

The third and final technique used to isolate memorable images of Washington involved an analysis of memorable advertising. This study, undertaken by the Gilmore Research Group, asked travelers to recall specific qualities of Washington state which were addressed in previously observed advertising promotions. The response was consistent with the other market findings with two exceptions. Again outdoor scenery (forest greenery and mountains) at 38% was the most memorable image. This, however, was followed by agriculture (specifically apples) at 17% rather than outdoor activities, which reached 13%, followed by cities at 12%. Within the city category, the space needle was recalled as the most memorable construction in Washington state. The high recollection of apples, it was noted, was due to the extensive advertising of the Washington Apple Commission. As you would expect, negative imagery such as rain, congestion and urban sprawl were not recalled in any advertising promotions.

CONCLUSION

Distilling the findings of the preceding studies, a number of environmental preference patterns associated with Washington’s state have emerged. The following is a

discussion of those patterns along with recommendations as to how future construction intervention might enhance destination "desirability."

ONE: Clearly, Washington's most significant perceived environmental characteristic is its wilderness landscape—lush forests, "grand snow-covered" mountains, and extensive waterways have been repeatedly chosen as the most associated image of Washington (both in market surveys and cover publication analysis). As Rank McNally's *Vacation Places Rated* (1989) states, ". . . Nature has been especially kind to this little corner of the world; among its natural assets are the salt waters of Puget Sound and Elliot Bay, Lake Washington, a 24-mile long body of free water, two mountain ranges—the Olympics to the west and the Cascades to the east—deep forests almost at the city's doorstep. . . ." (Rand McNally rated this region in Washington the #1 vacation spot in America.) Both distinction and preference for Washington state is rooted in wilderness rather than urbanity. Country is, almost without exception, preferred over city. "Country" in this case is both perceived and represented as an untouched, randomly ordered, alpine landscape with severe rock escarpments, vast forests, and natural water features. Only occasionally do you see other landscape types (i.e., steppes, deserts, cropland) on guide covers.

A hundred years ago, this character was no less revered. A guide published in 1893 entitled *The Resources and Attractiveness of Washington for the Homeseeker, Capitalist, and Tourist* stated that: "Those who travel in quest of pleasure or health will find here an area which in serenity of climate, richness of color, variety of scenery, luxuriance of mountain shrubbery, extent of forests, nobility of rivers, and grandeur of snow-shrouded mountains, will compare with any in the world."¹⁶

Construction intervention in support of this environmental preference would minimize disruption of existing wilderness areas (particularly alpine wilderness), be located in areas which have already been disturbed by construction, and whenever possible, endeavor to expand, restore and rehabilitate endangered wilderness systems.

TWO: Both image mapping and market analysis show a preference for what are perceived as natural features (vegetation, water, rock and sky) over constructed features (roads, buildings and other infrastructure). Structures covered only 8.8% of the travel guide cover images and rank well behind outdoor scenery in the market research surveys. Urban sprawl, mentioned as a negative attribute in Washington travel surveys notes also that distance to these features is, unfortunately, being increased by "sprawling development. Both Rand McNally's complimentary statement about a city's relationship to vegetation: "Forest almost at the cities doorstep," and *Destination Washington's* use of the foreshortening effect of a telephoto lens to make Mt. Rainier, a rather large rock, appear on the doorstep of Seattle (Fig. 7) illustrates this preference for close proximity between construction and landscape (vegetation and rock), city and country.

Another observation in both the market analysis and cover studies notes transportation preferences. Cover images included automobiles and roadways up until the early 1960's. From the late sixties to present with only a few exceptions, no roads or cars are included in cover images. The only modes of transportation shown are water craft, bicycles and footpaths. Surveys noted that "traffic and roads" were recalled as second only to the rain as the "worst things about vacationing in Washington."¹⁷

In support of these observations, construction intervention (buildings, roads, etc.) should remain subordinate to natural features. Construction should use a minimum amount of land area and allow natural features (rock, vegetation and/or water) to dominate the skyline. Additionally, any constructed intervention should maximize access to natural areas and minimize travel distance. Ideal routes of transportation to these amenities would be waterways, footpaths, and bike paths.

THREE: A preference for environments which are distinct from other environments (and thus provides regional identity) seems founded on both the consumer's need for visiting a place of distinction and the seller's need to market a "product" destination as superior to another "product" destination. A significant portion of travel market research has been generated out of a desire to understand how a particular destination (in this case Washington) is perceived as a distinct travel product (destination) unlike other travel products (destinations). Marketers realize that it is critical that travelers perceive that Washington's positive attributes are unlike any other place in the world. Otherwise, they may choose alternatives to Washington. Vance Parkard in his book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, states that "Advertisers see a compelling need to create a distinctive, highly appealing 'personality' for a product (or place) because of growing standardization. . . . The first task is one of creating some differentiation in the mind—some individualization for the product which has a long list of competitors very close to it in content."¹⁸ This desire to distinguish Washington is manifested in travel guide cover imagery which attempts to show unique construction and/or natural phenomena.

The most potent juxtaposition of these two characters is seen on the cover of the 1989-90 Destination Washington where construction (the Space Needle) is poised in the foreground and natural phenomena (Mt. Rainier) is lurking in the background (Fig. 7). Both the snow-covered, volcanic cone of Rainier and the flying saucer perched on flared steel legs are marketed as distinctive forms to Washington state—the fact that they exist side by side in the same landscape only adds to this sense of uniqueness. Elimination of these two icons from the image and this scene would be indistinguishable to most U.S. travelers.

Other, less notorious icons which are used on covers include Grand Coulee Dam and the ferries of Puget Sound. All share a common characteristic of being large, isolated, freestanding objects, qualities which advertisers use to aid in consumer "product" identification.

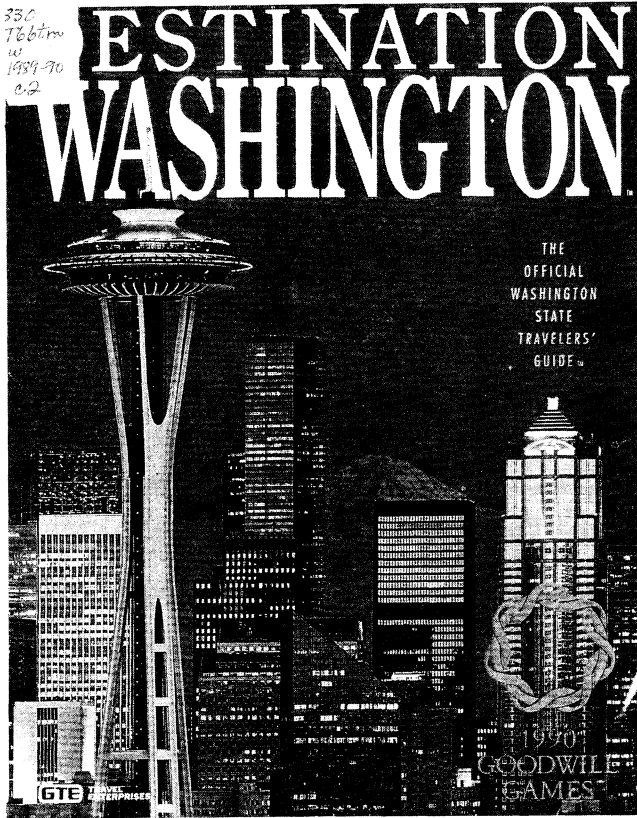


Fig. 7. Two distinctive forms of Washington state juxtaposed—the Space Needle and Mount Rainier (*Destination Washington*), 1989-90.

Washington's spatial distinctiveness has not been recognized in either the cover images or traveler surveys. Unlike Montana's travel marketing strategy which focuses on the perception of the vastness of its open spaces, "The Big Sky Country," Washington imagery focuses more on the size, diversity, and eccentricities of its human-made and natural objects. Also, Washington travel advertising has been relatively unsuccessful in identifying an architectural character which is perceived as unique to Washington beyond unusual size (the once world's largest dam) or unusual form (the King Dome). If any stylistic pattern emerges, it is a preference for what the consumer believes to be either a historic structure, such as a frontier town storefront or a barn constructed in the late 1800's or futuristic structures such as the Lake Washington "Floating" Bridge or the Space Needle. Architectural form which makes no claim to either extreme is rarely signified. An architecture of the past or future is preferred over the present.

In support of these findings, future construction interventions should endeavor to further amplify and illuminate unique juxtapositions between construction and the natural phenomena of Washington. Intervention form, aside from distinguishing itself by being an extreme—the biggest, the

most bizarre, should be either supportive of historic precedent or venture into imagery associated with the future—the bold, space-aged, exotic in structure and materiality. Finally, constructed forms should seek to express the dramatic diversity of climate and landscape of Washington's state. For one of Washington state's most unique qualities can be found in the fact that it is many distinctive states within one. To quote *The Resources and Attractions of Washington for the House Seeker, Capitalist and Tourist*, 1893:

It is the grandest scenery in the world. One has here in combination, the sublimity of Switzerland, the picturesqueness of the Rhine, the rugged beauty of Norway, the breezy variety of the Thousand Islands of the St. Lawrence, or the Hebrides of the North Sea, the soft rich-toned skies of Italy, the pastoral landscape of England, with velvet fields and magnificent groves, massed with floral bloom, and the blending tints and bold color of a New England Indian Summer.

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