

Wilderness: An American Urban Condition

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The urban majority in America generally conceptualizes the United States as a network of cities with open spaces (ranging from suburbs to farmlands to forests to wilderness) in between. Perhaps the country should be reconceptualized in the reverse so that Americans will perceive of the great wilderness areas as the country's heartland, with areas of progressively greater development radiating out from them.

-Daniel J. Elazar

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.

-Henry David Thoreau

INTRODUCTION

American cities are overwhelmingly similar in many ways; yet, each gives a very different impression. In this essay I contend that one's impression of an American city results in large part from its unique relationship with the American wilderness.

All too frequently, city and wilderness are viewed as oppositional, discontinuous conditions of the land: they may encroach upon each other, but they remain fundamentally at odds. This view assumes that cities are centralized, bounded and resistant to intrusion. American cities are none of these. Unlike many cities elsewhere, American cities have always been amenable to infusion of goods, ideas and people from beyond narrowly circumscribed limits. Thus, to limit discussion of American cities to their physical structures, or to social and economic institutions would be misguided. In order to understand the character of an American city, consideration must be given to the way that citizens view distant factors that effect them,¹ particularly the expanses of unsettled land, of wilderness, on the North American continent.

CITY AND REGION

Whether a city draws its cultural value and economic re-

sources from a geographically localized region or a global network, the stance its citizens adopt toward the city's surroundings greatly influences its character. The overt effects of this relationship vary according to the nature of the city. A City founded as a largely self-sufficient entity tends to exhibit close affinity to its region because its citizens derive benefit or suffer from conditions of the immediate surroundings. Land surrounding such a city which has been perfected by human labor, often over many generations, is seen as a necessary component of human and cultural survival. Wilderness beyond this land, indeed anything foreign to the city's territory, appears to be antagonistic to the citizens' interests and is either subdued or resisted by successive layers of defense: hedgerows, fences, and city walls.

When Filarete proposed to design a city of this sort, the fictional city-state of Sforzinda, he expounded the necessary conditions for siting it at great length. Because Sforzinda was to maintain itself with the resources available nearby, its siting was a matter of utmost importance. "The site I have seen," Filarete declared, "is of such a nature that I think the city will be well located in a salubrious place, that is, healthy and also fertile. At least there is the wherewithal for man to live."² Before settling in the place, Filarete took great care to assure that it could provide the city adequate ground with level spaces and pleasing views, as well as suitable conditions for agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting and fishing.³ It had to supply wood, sand, lime and stone for construction.⁴ It also had to supply, so Filarete intimated, hearty and healthy subjects to perform the labor required to construct, maintain and defend the city. Sforzinda was to be, decidedly, a product of local conditions.

A city that forms part of a larger network of cities exhibits its relationship to the land much differently. Citizens do not necessarily depend on the locality for direct material benefit; therefore, the population tends to see land beyond the city and its immediate sphere of influence as a complement to the city. The city's essence cannot be reduced to endemic elements such as buildings, streets, people, or institutions.

At its foundation, such a city relies on *distant* factors to establish the suitability of its site. When a city of the Roman

empire was to be founded, for example, an augur scanned the horizon and waited for signs that arrived from *beyond the limits of his view*: "the flight of birds, the movement of stray animals, thunder perhaps, the motion of the clouds"⁵ Subsequent examination of livers removed from animals which had recently grazed on the site (innards, too, are rather distant to ordinary experience) helped to establish its habitability. Consideration of immediate environmental conditions of the site was primarily meant to ascertain its salubrity, "since," according to Vitruvius, it was necessary "to seek healthiness in laying out the walls of cities."⁶ Once an appropriate site was found, the city was oriented along axes established by surveyors, which implied the city's connection with the greater realm of the Empire.⁷ In building the city, founders made use of locally available materials in the interests of cost, but they generally dismissed indigenous methods of construction and urban administration.⁸ Roman cities therefore derived their essence from beyond their localities, from just over the horizon or from the distant center of Rome.

Like Roman cities, most American cities were founded as part of a broad network of cities. This has made them relatively independent of local conditions of the land while subjecting them to the vicissitudes of many distant factors. Because the first American cities were established as outposts of the British, French and Spanish empires, differences between early American colonial cities fell primarily along cultural lines. Their relative isolation on the continent forced many of them to maintain a degree of self-sufficiency and dependence on local conditions, but they affected a certain indifference to these conditions, and drew their character from Europe.

Political union after the American Revolution and improved communication between regions on the continent gradually dispelled cultural differences between cities. Citizens turned their attention from Europe to the west, searching for a sense of *America* from the great, unexplored continent. Henry David Thoreau said, looking from Concord Massachusetts:

I believe that the forest which I see in the western horizon stretches uninterruptedly toward the setting sun, and there are no towns nor cities in it of enough consequence to disturb me. Let me live where I will, on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and ever am I leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness.⁹

"The West is," he said, "but another name for the Wild."¹⁰

In the West, urban centers developed at converging supply routes, along railroad lines or in proximity to sources of raw materials which could be profitably shipped back to the East. Routes were often rough and infrequently traveled, so new settlements had to remain somewhat self-sufficient until adequate infrastructure could develop. Their relative isolation from eastern cities and from each other allowed some regional variation, but as links improved, variations decreased.

Continuing development has made American cities more similar to one another. The newest portions of New Orleans (originally French), for example, are not so different from those of Orlando (Spanish), or Wilmington (British). Cities like Cincinnati, Ohio; Portland, Oregon and New Brunswick, New Jersey bear remarkable similarities to each other, despite tremendous geographical separation. As links between cities in America continue to multiply and become more efficient, specific local characteristics of cities become less prevalent. Construction materials become less specific to particular localities, and building techniques are gradually standardized. Even local weather conditions can often be ignored in American cities, because any non-salubrious effects can be mitigated by central heating and air conditioning. These factors have led to a general homogenization of city form in the United States, so that, despite historical differences, American cities have become overwhelmingly similar to each other. This has led some critics of American cities to conclude that they are all *the same*. In his book, *Genius Loci*, Christian Norberg-Schulz despairs of discovering a unique character or a sense of place in American cities:

The grid-iron plans of American cities make an 'open' world of opportunities manifest. This world is open horizontally as well as vertically. Whereas the community expands horizontally, the success of the individual is indicated by the height (sic) of the building erected on the standard lot. Although the grid-iron thus possesses a certain 'freedom', it hardly allows for the concretization of a distinct *genius loci*.¹¹

Norberg-Schulz implies that the character of a city must somehow arise from its physical structures, from within its own boundaries. But in this he misrepresents the nature of American cities. American cities *do not* characterize themselves in this way; they have always established their identities in relation to distant factors, to territory beyond their spheres of influence. After the United States declared its independence of European rule, this territory was primarily the land beyond the frontier, the American wilderness.

FRONTIER AND WILDERNESS

That wilderness would somehow influence Americans' notion of cities hardly seems unusual when we consider the tremendous effect that it has had on Americans. In his famous essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Frederick Jackson Turner demonstrated that the frontier and the wilderness beyond it has significantly molded the American character:

To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working

for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. Movement has been a dominant fact [in America], and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its existence.¹²

Jackson's use of the term 'frontier' accents this American propensity to extend limits. For Jackson one hundred years ago and for most Americans today 'frontier' denotes the limit of known territory and the advent of wilderness. The word means something quite different to Europeans, however. In many European languages cognates with the term 'frontier' denote an accepted boundary between two states. A 'frontier' establishes in Europe distinct *limits* to legitimate expansion; in America it represents an *opening* for expansion into unexplored territory. In their interpretation of frontiers Americans show an enduring propensity to orient their view elsewhere. As Jackson predicted, Americans continue to demand a wider field for their existence. Though the American land frontier closed before the turn of the century,¹³ and the west can no longer draw people precisely as it used to, Americans seem to be always confronting another frontier. America acquired "the last frontier,"¹⁴ Alaska, in 1871. Later Americans probed "the final frontier" again and touched the moon. Even more recently, scientists have begun to cross "the last frontier"¹⁵ once more as they unravel the complexities of the human brain to discover means by which people might experience an as yet unformed reality.

A desire to extend limits arises, to some extent, as a natural consequence of a human sense of place. Edward Casey describes a person's relationship with the world in terms of a series of interrelated arcs emanating from one's position in a place. The first arc defines one's immediate sphere of influence. It describes what one can touch at a particular moment and is bounded by the ineffable limit between "here and there."¹⁶ The second arc, the "arc of reachability,"¹⁷ describes one's sphere of *potential* influence and is constrained by one's ability to gain access to a given territory. Beyond this arc lies a realm that disappears and resists human efforts to control it: the atmosphere, inaccessible terrain, spirit and so on.¹⁸ This realm has always fascinated Americans. Whether actually or vicariously, Americans, perhaps more than any other culture, have maintained the necessity of bringing distant things closer, of expanding the 'arc of reachability.'

The wilderness provides an archetypal example of something distant because it always remains just beyond human reach. It excludes human intervention.¹⁹ Wilderness' insistent detachment from us spurs our curiosity and urges us to get closer to it.²⁰ Walter Benjamin explains the feeling in this way:

If while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a

branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura—namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly.²¹

Though the American desire to cross frontiers may threaten nature's 'aura of distance,' an urge to extend frontiers and to advance on unknown territory need not imply dominance. It can help to establish a sense of groundedness, a human locus in relation to the natural landscape. If widely shared, an urge to extend frontiers and to confront the wilderness develops not only a personal sense of *here*, but a collective one. A sense of what is 'out there,' of the vast North American continent that stretches out beyond places of inhabitation, helps to form the basis of a uniquely American sense of place. As long as citizens consider their position to be within a network of *cities*, however, it remains difficult to distinguish one American city from another.

When Americans begin to "perceive of the great wilderness areas as the country's heartland, with areas of progressively greater development radiating out from them,"²² as Daniel J. Elazar suggests, American cities distinguish themselves as significant variations on an American theme. As Frank Lloyd Wright designed houses in the suburbs of Chicago, for example, he did not conceive them on the outskirts of America's second largest city so much as he imagined them to take shape at the edge of the prairie, where "every detail as to height becomes intensely significant and breadths fall short." He thus declared of his Chicago houses that "all necessary heights have been eliminated. More intimate relation with outdoor environment and far-reaching vista is sought to balance the lessening of height."²³ Though the suburbs of Chicago do not actually occupy the prairie in its primeval form, they inflect themselves toward it and derive much of their character from it. The Sears Tower emphasizes a similar conception. As a Second City monument it remains rather banal, but seen against the landscape it begins to play upon the prairie's tendency to amplify heights. The building then becomes a landmark of the "great Middle West, [where]," to quote Wright again, "every tree towers above the great calm plains of flowered surfaces as the plain lies serene beneath a wonderful unlimited sweep of sky."²⁴ Similar considerations of other American cities can evoke characteristics that are otherwise difficult to discover in the physical structures of the cities themselves.

AMERICAN CITIES AND WILDERNESS

To conceptualize the interplay between cities and wilderness in America, it is important to acknowledge that their relationship is not always entirely complementary. Because cities and suburbs have expanded ceaselessly during the last century, wilderness in America is no longer so ubiquitous that it dominates man's work, as it did until well into the nineteenth century. At that time, a few prescient individu-

als²⁵ foresaw that the wilderness would inevitably be overcome by expanding settlement, and they sought means by which the wilderness might be protected. Woodrow Wilson responded to growing concerns about America's wild areas by establishing the National Park Service in 1916 "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."²⁶ In the early years of the twentieth century, such an idea was revolutionary: "Other nations had preserved gardens and open spaces,"²⁷ but they had not preserved *wilderness*. Today state and national parks help to maintain a sense of the wilderness as it was when Europeans first settled the continent.²⁸ They perpetuate the American ideal of the frontier, and make Americans aware that they live in the presence of something other than the man-made artifacts of increasingly anonymous cities, something much vaster than their urban domain. The 1964 Wilderness Act expanded the mission of the parks to protect some areas in their *primeval* state, "in order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions."²⁹

American cities sustain their identities in relation to preserved wilderness, but they also threaten it. Miami, for example, emerges out of the swamps of Southern Florida gaining much of its character from the Everglades; Tucson is an oasis in the Sonora Desert, and New Orleans settles into the Mississippi delta. Each of these cities, however, by the way it uses the water that sustains the land around it, threatens to lose that which makes it unique. The city and the land exist in a constant interplay from which issues a unique urban character and a sense of place.

Cities in the Western United States are endowed with vast tracts of unsettled land at their doorsteps. From Seattle distant mountains and water provide visible, dramatic backdrops to the skyline. A sense of nature's proximity, as well as its 'aura of distance,' pervades the city. Though the buildings and streets that constitute Seattle could just as easily occupy Chicago or Atlanta, one gets an overwhelming sense that *Seattle* could never exist on the Midwestern Prairie or in the Shadow of the southern Appalachians. A feeling for Seattle seems to arrive from beyond Seattle, from Mount Rainier, which appears over the horizon like the portentous vultures that inaugurated Rome. The water, the mountains, the air give Seattle a *feel* that makes it unlike any other American city.³⁰

This sense of 'distant character' is even more vivid in Anchorage, Alaska. Anchorage still maintains a distinct frontier character, and the sense of imminent wilderness there is powerful. Dark, forbidding mountains surround a city which is, otherwise, a rather desolate version of Cleveland or Syracuse. Its name, Anchorage, eloquently characterizes the provisional feel one gets while walking its streets. The city is a stopping place from which one travels far afield, a place to briefly lay anchor. It is entirely dominated by the 600,000 square miles of virtually unsettled territory into which it merges.

Only in Alaska does one get a sense that the American wilderness is sufficiently vast to sustain a real sense of frontier, a sense that nature can still dominate man's work. Even there, however, man's encroachment leaves its mark and threatens to overcome nature's aura. The seemingly endless Alaska pipeline connects Prudhoe Bay with Valdez and roads extend their fingers from Nome, Kodiak and Ruby. In Washington, particularly near Seattle, it seems that man has overtaken the wilderness, and now can make irrevocable incursions into the land. Immense clearcuts scar the Olympics and the Cascades, and suburbs engulf Lake Washington. Seattle threatens to obscure what makes it *Seattle*. Unfortunately, many American cities despair of reversing such trends. This is more often due to negligence and disregard for wilderness than to a lack of it: the character of Miami, and its appeal as a place to visit, is threatened by tremendous over-development of the Southern Florida shoreline and by the degradation of the Everglades. These are problems to which Miami has been a substantial contributor.

For many American cities, particularly in the East, even the luxury of disregard for wilderness is no longer possible, because so little wilderness remains. This does not mean, however, that deriving a *sense* of the American wilderness is no longer possible in the East. In the absence of untouched wilderness we can still attempt to preserve its memory in some tangible way. Even the *memory* of unsettled land can provide an opening toward something distant. Central Park in New York City provides just such an opening. The park, with its pockets of naked rock and untamed vegetation, acts as an enclave, albeit embattled, of wilderness in the vast expanse of urban fabric. It develops a affective counterpoint to the city. It centralizes the city not on institutions or on some physical structure, but opens the city toward the potential landscape that extends well beyond 5th Avenue and Central Park West. It provides a vision, however vague, of what the land was, so that one can get a clearer sense in New York of what the city has become and where it stands.

Even so, Central Park presents a very limited view of wilderness. It is besieged by the city and provides minimal access to the primeval conditions of Manhattan Island. Like Central Park, the parks that give people access to nature in other American cities are often besieged by streets and buildings. Though valuable, they give little indication of the awe that settlers on the American frontier must have experienced as they looked westward, or that visitors to Anchorage feel when they face the Chugach Mountains and the virtually endless wilderness to the North. The natural landscape of most urban parks falls well within the domain of human influence; it ultimately merges with the urban fabric and becomes as characterless as the city streets that bound it.

American cities require more than gardens and open space to sustain their identity; they require wilderness so that they can participate in the natural aura that extends beyond their confines and so defines their essential character. Americans must realize, with Thoreau, that for America

"hope and the future are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps." To understand this is particularly important now, when we have almost completely subdued the land, when we can no longer share Thoreau's pleasure at how small man's works appear in the great American landscape.³¹ Some cities have begun to act on this understanding by reclaiming areas that were once developed, allowing them to revert to a natural state. Old railways and vacant lots begin to re-open cities to incursions from beyond their limits, inaugurating again a vision of the land frontier. When we conceive of cities and wilderness as fundamentally continuous spheres that complement each other, we help to sustain not only American wilderness areas, but a fundamental aspect of American urban character.

NOTES

- ¹ In *The Idea of a Town*, Joseph Rykwert declares that "Although the last half century has accustomed us to regard dreams as objects susceptible of serious, even scientific, study, yet the suggestion of fantasy which the word implies is regarded as offensive in the context of urban planning. This is partly because it is a matter where capital investment is huge, and partly because the well-being of the masses, a well-being equated with physical amenity is at stake. The way in which the space is occupied is much studied, but exclusively in physical terms of occupation and amenity. Such procedures have been criticized by a number of sociologists. It seems to me that they are right: that some consideration must be given to the model, to the conceptual prototype of the town which its inhabitants construct mentally, and which is often exemplified in their homes." Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989) 25. In this paper I extend Rykwert's argument by asserting that to understand an American city consideration must be given to a vision of the American landscape, a vision that may include either a real or an ideal wilderness. I contend that a common dream of the American frontier and the wilderness beyond it is that which ultimately distinguishes the conceptual prototype that citizens of a given American city construct.
- ² Filarete (Antonio di Piero Averlino), *Treatise on Architecture*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965) 22.
- ³ Filarete 23.
- ⁴ Filarete 25-36.
- ⁵ Rykwert 54.
- ⁶ Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, trans. Frank Granger (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1939) 31.
- ⁷ Rykwert 45-47, 202.
- ⁸ In constructing a city, Vitruvius recommended using locally available materials in the interests of cost savings, because the transport of materials from elsewhere "may be difficult and costly." Vitruvius 33. Spiro Kostof notes that in the colonies "architecture was a civilizing mission and a sure means of establishing Roman visibility. In established lands with their own architectural traditions, it was crucial to stamp the Roman seal on the cityscapes through recognizable building types. The state became involved in every aspect of construction. It manufactured its own bricks in state kilns. Transportation, storage, and manpower were all centrally coordinated." Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 192.
- ⁹ Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," *Walking* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) 19.
- ¹⁰ Thoreau 19.
- ¹¹ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979) 73.
- ¹² Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962) 37. My italics.
- ¹³ Turner 1.
- ¹⁴ *Alaska Official State Guide and Vacation Planner* (1993) 18.
- ¹⁵ e.g. Richard M. Restak, *The Brain: The Last Frontier* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1979).
- ¹⁶ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 55.
- ¹⁷ Casey 60.
- ¹⁸ Casey 207.
- ¹⁹ The 1964 Wilderness act defines 'wilderness' as follows: "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Quoted in Elizabeth R. Gillette, ed., *Action for Wilderness*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1972) 186.
- ²⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 222.
- ²¹ Benjamin 222-223.
- ²² Daniel J. Elazar, *Building Cities in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Hamilton Press, 1987) 18.
- ²³ Frank Lloyd Wright, *An American Architecture*, ed. Edgar Kaufmann (New York: Horizon Press, 1955) 193.
- ²⁴ Wright 193.
- ²⁵ e.g. John Muir, John Powell, Aldo Leopold and Theodore Roosevelt
- ²⁶ Paul C. Pritchard, "The Best Idea America Ever Had," *National Geographic* August 1991: 36.
- ²⁷ Pritchard 36.
- ²⁸ "In 1960 the [National] Park Service managed 187 sites covering 26 million acres. Since then park lands have trebled in area, partly because the public has pressed to protect unique features of the United States" Today it encompasses over 80 million acres — about 3.5 percent of the total land area of the U. S. A.. Other federally owned land covers another one third of the United States. See Pritchard 36-59. See also, Richard Conniff, "Federal Lands", *National Geographic* February 1994: 2-39.
- ²⁹ Gillette 185.
- ³⁰ Wilderness even farther afield also contributes to Seattle's character. To some extent Seattle maintains a sense that it is a frontier city in the old style. Huge numbers of boats depart from Seattle for the fishing season in Alaskan waters, especially now that salmon fishing has been restricted in the waters off Washington State. Indeed, some people call Seattle "the regional capital of Alaska." Marvin W. Mikesell, "Comparative Studies in Frontier History," *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier*, ed. Richard Hofstadter and Seymour Martin Lipset (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1968) 159.
- ³¹ Thoreau 12-13.