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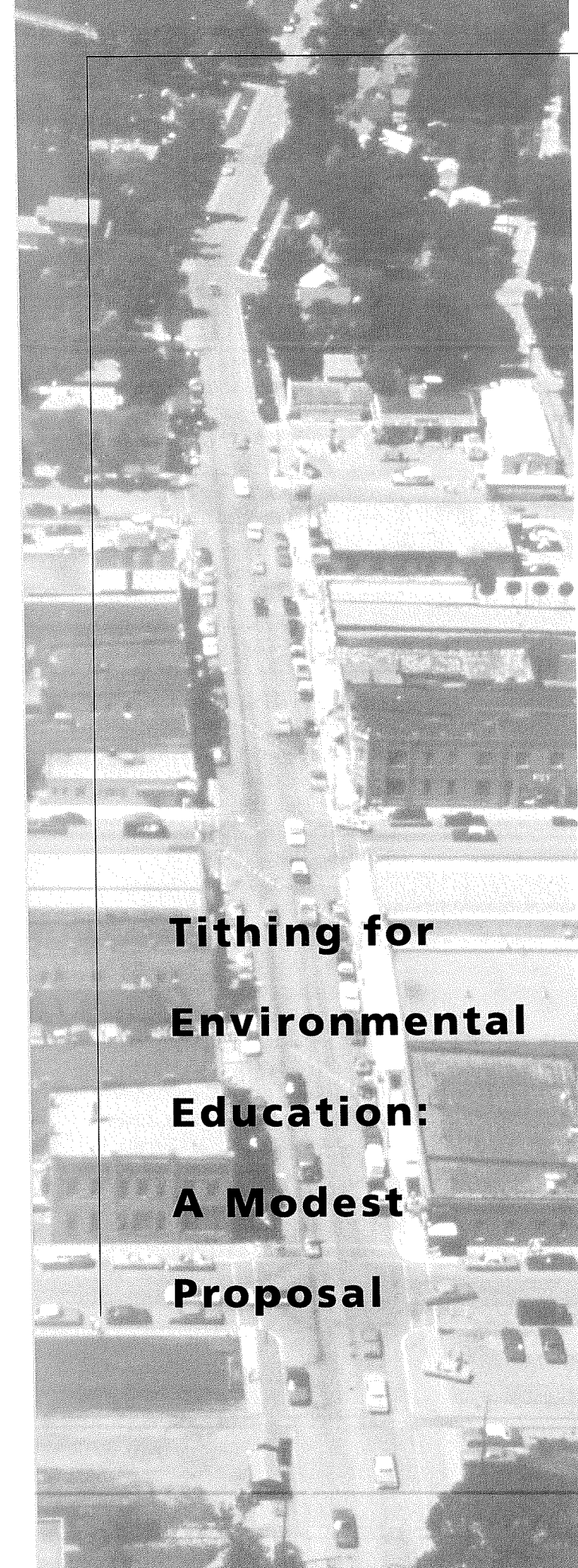
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An aerial, black and white photograph of a city street. The street runs vertically through the center of the frame, lined with buildings and trees. The image has a grainy, high-contrast quality.

Tithing for Environmental Education: A Modest Proposal

It is time to push cultural landscape studies beyond mere description and critical connoisseurship towards active intervention.

With that challenge Roger Montgomery, dean of the College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley, opened the recent Berkeley Symposium on Cultural Landscape Studies. Historical and cultural studies of the built landscape, Montgomery said, could be and should be a basis for environmental action and change. The preceding discussion, expanded from that which took place at the symposium, suggests one avenue of action: We should use historical and cultural interpretation of the environment as a tool for public environmental education.

Rina Swentzell, a New Mexico architect and anthropologist, writes about the Bureau of Indian Affairs day school near her home in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico, where she was a student. In the day school, as Swentzell put it, “appreciation of the immediate place was impossible.” She and her classmates learned about New York and George Washington but not about the Santa Clara Pueblo or the people and places of the upper Rio Grande.

Dolores Hayden, an architect and urban cultural historian, outlines the path-breaking work of The Power of Place—a small non-profit group that celebrates the history of ethnic minorities and women through preservation, public art and design. David Chuenyan Lai,

as a geographer, traces how people of Chinese descent have displayed varying degrees of traditional Chinese imagery in North American Chinatowns.

Swentzell's experience points out the need for locally based environmental action; Hayden's experience shows how local information can be used subtly to change local awareness; Lai's analysis shows how variable and subtle the use of visual form can be.

All three show the importance of ordinary, everyday surroundings, often overlooked by outsiders, as expressions of environmental meaning. One need not go to school as a Native American in order to have one's local cultural landscape ignored. I grew up white, male, middle-class, middle-brow and very comfortable in a small farm-service town of the Upper Midwest. In my grade school and high school, appreciation of the immediate place was impossible. We sat in Mayville, N.D., and looked at pictures of large cities in Texas, New York and California, preparing to become out-migrants to join some distant labor pool. Later, in architecture school at North Dakota State University in Fargo, it was rare to find a course or professor seriously addressing the local scene.

Ironically, what changed all that for me was moving to Berkeley to study geography at the University of California. In my first year of graduate school, as a raw architect who had never read anything, a dozen first-rate faculty barraged me with new ways of seeing and thinking about spatial relations. My intention had been to learn about New York and Chicago, not Mayville or Fargo. Indeed, in that first year my ideas about large American cities changed radically. But so did my view and my understanding of little Mayville.

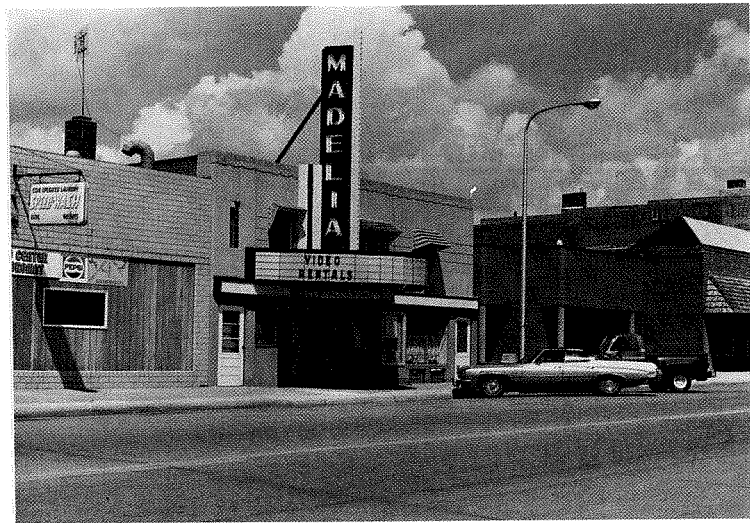
Today I am angry that it is necessary to move to Berkeley—or to Penn State, or to a very few other places—to learn to see the meaning of towns like those in North Dakota and Minnesota, or their counterparts in any other state.

Every day on my walk to school I crossed the empty, 200-foot-wide swath of railroad tracks in the middle of town. Along that stretch there was nothing to stop the bitter north wind but the Arctic Circle. I never thought about what it meant that those tracks were owned two thousand miles away.

No one explained that the old single men who ate at the Corner Cafe and lived at the Northern Hotel on the wrong side of the tracks were leftovers from the hobo labor force

The railroad swath in Ft. Madison, Iowa. This swath is a difficult-to-traverse zone. Photos courtesy Paul Groth.





The difference in the appearance of the main streets of Madelia, Minn., and Fairbault, Minn. (below), has to do, in part, with whether the profits that were generated in the town were recycled in the local economy.



that had once harvested the local wheat crops and the more distant forests of Minnesota.

No one explained how the grain elevators that towered over the landscape explained the economic reality of our region. We were a colony of the rest of the U.S.: All the locally grown products were exported a thousand miles away, along with the profits to be gained from them, and everything else was imported, retail.

Had I known to ask such simple questions about the relationship between the circulation of capital and local culture, I would have understood why our minimal main street looked so mean and bedraggled in comparison to the luxurious main streets in towns that were of similar size but whose profits had circulated more locally.

In short, it never occurred to me just how much the building and layout of my town were enmeshed in the past and present social relations of the region—and that the same was true elsewhere, too.

Public education is no worse in North Dakota than in most of the United States. With the possible exceptions of people in New England and Virginia, perhaps, Americans have almost no chance that a local environmental literature is easily available to teach them about simple small towns or ordinary urban districts. Consider that there is not a single book about the cultural meaning of the suburban ranch house.

Teaching people how to see their present and past environments as active factors in human social relations is an enormously important kind of activism that environmental designers and spatially attuned historians ignore too often. Teaching about landscapes in public schools, on billboards and pamphlets, in newspapers—wherever we can—might save design educators from the trap of mere connoisseurship about which Montgomery warned.

Teaching, writing and professional practice can *be* activism if we set our sights beyond the quarterly journals and slick professional magazines. We cannot all be as effective as Dolores Hayden has been in her work with *The Power of Place*. However, as a means of avoiding mere connoisseurship, designers, geographers, students, faculty and practitioners should literally consider *tithing*; working perhaps every other Friday doing something for public education.

While broadly conceived guidebooks and newspaper features may be ideal projects, the actions themselves need not be media related. They can be quite simple, and there is no single best way.¹

Teachers, writers and designers might periodically advertise a short neighborhood walking tour. They might volunteer to discuss with a nearby high school English class an environmentally rich essay by J. B. Jackson or Joan Didion—or the absence of environmental influence in someone else's writing.

Architects might publicly post a series of isometric drawings (perhaps from Sanborn maps) of the historical development of adjacent blocks. The same exercise could be done for a school classroom, showing blocks near the school or near some part of town all the students would know.

One well-known educational project of the 1960s had inner-city junior high students map neighborhood gang turfs. The students knew exactly where they were, but had never seen social relations so unusually portrayed on a map.

For a new building or park, it would be educational to install a plaque showing what used to be on the site (and who lived, worked, farmed, or played there), as many generations back as possible. Leaving a copy of *Places* at your dentist's office might be an act of environmental education.

Projects such as these are important and long overdue. As the geographer Peirce Lewis has said, Americans are the most visually and spatially illiterate people in the industrialized world and perhaps in the entire world. The illiteracy is not a matter of whether Americans can discern style, elegant design, or innate esthetic delight in buildings or landscapes. Americans, by and large, simply are unconscious of how the organization of space affects their everyday lives. They live like fish that cannot recognize water. Or, as a social theorist might put it, Americans are not aware of how the social becomes the spatial.

The task, then, is rather straightforward. Each of us with the ability to see the local environment has a duty to teach that ability to some part of the public. Setting aside some time every other week—tithing—could get the project started.

We must be cautious not to teach about the environment only as product of design or as a series of isolated artifacts created by heroic designers. We must teach a way of seeing the built environment as an ever-changing quilt woven by our

group experience of social, political and historical forces all within the realities of the bioregion. We must teach a way of seeing the evolution and meaning of ordinary, everyday places as well as special places.

Our combined tithes could be quite a powerful force. If we begin to act now, by the year 2000 perhaps grade school and high school students will not have to become specialists to understand and appreciate the power, influence and interest of their everyday surroundings.

Note

1. For designers, Richard Saul Wurman's *Making the City Observable* (MIT Press, 1971), an early collection of visual teaching ideas, is still one of the best sources of inspiration.

**The wrong side of the tracks:
a common laborer's hotel
in Mineral Wells, Colo.**

