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## Places

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Perceptions of and Reflections on Yosemite Valley [Place Debate: Yosemite National Park - Perceptions]

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### Author

Litton, R Burton, Jr

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# Perceptions of and Reflections on Yosemite Valley

Yosemite Valley is the symbol of Yosemite National Park, and images of the Valley, along with those of Yellowstone, serve as symbols of the national parks in general.

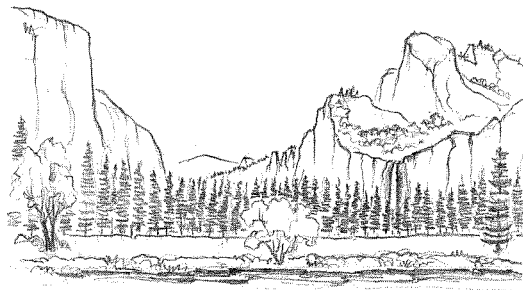
Yet Yosemite Valley is an anomaly; it is neither typical of the park that bears its name nor of the Sierra Nevada. Perhaps Hetch Hetchy Valley, in the northwestern reaches of the Park, shared something of Yosemite Valley's structure and scale before its conversion to a reservoir for San Francisco's water supply. But Hetch Hetchy lacked the concentrated richness in elements that distinguishes Yosemite. It is that very concentration of geologic, hydrologic, ecologic, scenic and recreational features that gives Yosemite a worldwide reputation and, at the same time, carries the seeds of its own destruction.

While the impact of too much development and too many people in too small an area poses serious design and management problems, the Valley remains an extraordinary creation. Painters of the Hudson River School pronounced the Valley landscape sublime, a product of divine intervention. This explanation of the Valley's aesthetic superiority is not likely to convince contemporary audiences, but an exploration of the Valley's visual structure,



Merced River  
below Valley View

1

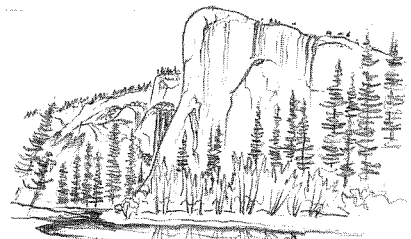


El Capitan

Valley View

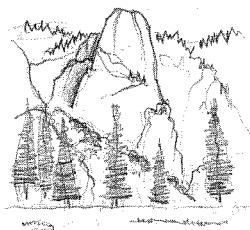
Bridgveil  
Falls

2



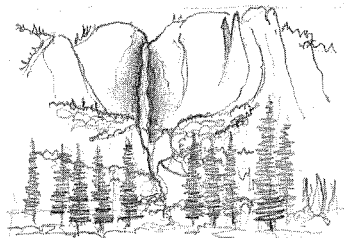
El Capitan from E, upstream

3



Sentinel Rocks

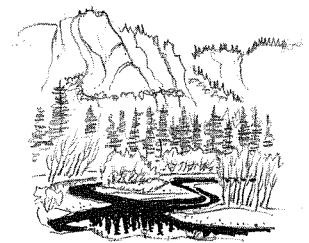
4



Yosemite Falls

300-3

5



Merced River, NE edge of Hetchy  
Reservoir

6

its perceptual qualities and the natural processes that occur there help explain why it is a distinctive place.

### Measuring from Wall to Wall

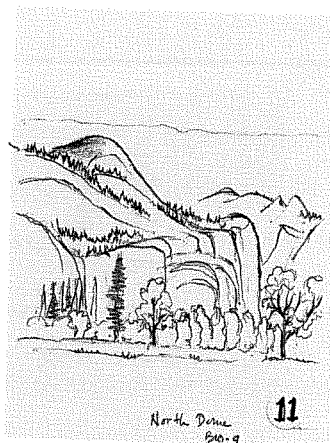
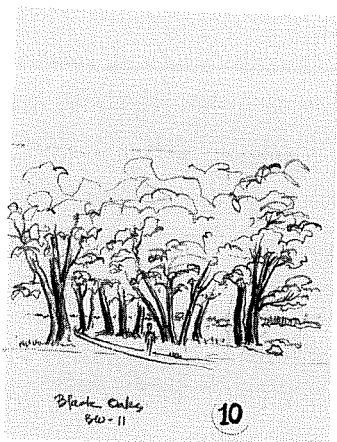
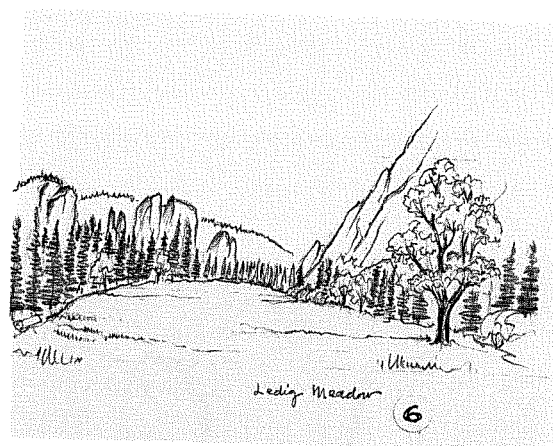
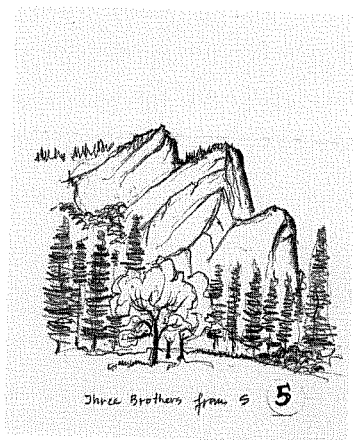
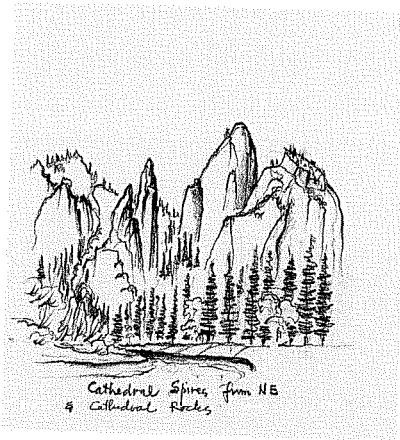
The visual sense of the Valley begins below Bridalveil Meadow, where the Valley space begins. From here, it is about seven and a half miles east to the closing of the space at Mirror Lake and at Happy Isles. The Valley floor, which is the area in between and which sits at approximately the 4,000-foot contour (where talus slides and cliff base inhibit ease of use and movement), covers about 2,200 acres—less than three-tenths of one percent of the Park's total area. Stores, lodgings, the visitor center and administrative offices are concentrated in the 1,000 acres of the Valley's east end; most visitors spend time in this tiny piece of the Park.

Cross sections of the Valley show the ratio of floor widths to cliff wall heights varies from 1:1 to 1.5:1, a condition that rarely occurs elsewhere. The sheer walls read as vertical and simultaneously incorporate a scale distinction in their rise from base to sky of two-thirds of a mile or more. When did you last stand close to a wall that shot up 3,500 feet?

Coordinated with the Valley's sectional enclosure is the longitudinal continuity of the space visitors experience by following the road or river. The ground plan of the Valley divides into three spatial compartments with accompanying dog-leg shifts of road and river alignments. These shifting paths of view or movement dictate what the observer sees and encounters as a sequence of visual experiences. Nothing happens all at once; there is a degree of mystery in what will be next. As one travels along, the diversity of the Valley—its stone monuments, subordinate spaces and internal elements—are revealed bit by bit.

### The River and Meadows

The Merced River, as carving agent and one-time glacial pathway, follows the westward orientation typical of the drainage pattern responding to the Sierra Nevada uplift. On the one hand, the River and its envelope of space are another of the visual continuities of the Valley. On the other, there is ecological richness and contrast based upon diametrically opposed north and south wall exposures.



Visual unity of the Valley is created by its typical but varied cross sections, a unity with variety suggested in the accompanying sketches.

Sketches by R. Burton Litton, Jr.

High up on the north-facing slope (on top of which is Glacier Point), pockets and strings of bigleaf maple and other deciduous vegetation make seasonal displays, enlivening the color of the mosaic dominated by stone and conifers. The south-facing slope (from which El Capitan rises) is more somber and consistent year round with its gray granite and deep green mix of pine and live oak. Maple and dogwood are conspicuous at the north-facing (south side) cliff base, where moisture and coolness suit them; these are not present at the base of the opposite side, where black oak thrives in that hotter, drier environment.

Perceptually, the River and wet meadows serve as a central open space system from which the visitor can best see the Valley and the stone monuments. The water, meadows and riparian dominants of black cottonwood, alder and willow are all dynamic in their seasonal changes.

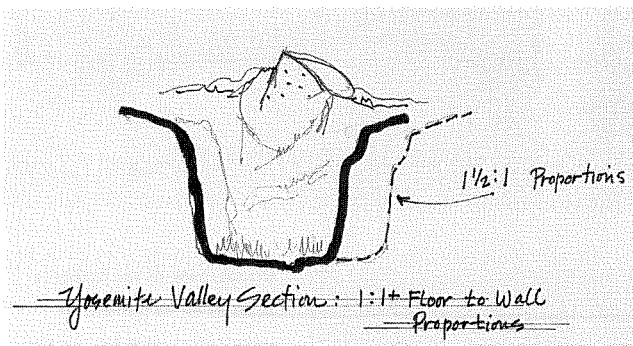
The meadows have a life of their own as subordinate small-scale spaces contained within the big-scale enclosure of the Valley. That life is not only in the way the meadow sedges, grasses and forbs change with the years' passage, but also with the congregation of visitors, both human and animal, for whom the meadows are a magnet.

If ecology is to have its way, the meadows will disappear, eventually to be engulfed by the mixed conifer forest. Maintaining the meadows as they are is critical to preserving the perceptual and aesthetic experiences visitors seek—and the visual quality of the Valley.

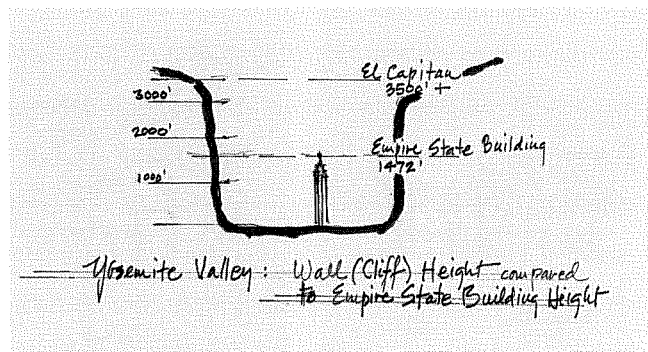
### The Ephemeral Landscape

The Valley's landscape is ephemeral, perhaps its most intriguing quality. A myriad of transient factors—sun, shade, climate, weather, atmospheric conditions, seasonal changes and the presence of animals—affect the way the Valley looks in both subtle and obvious ways. Cataloguing and portraying the Valley's temporal appearances is a fruitless task, but a few examples are appropriate.

Sunlight and shade strike the Valley in response to the sun's orientation, the Valley's dog-leg structure and time of the year. Shade dominates the south side, sun the north. Because of the sinuous form of the Valley, south-facing Yosemite Falls are highlighted in the morning and shaded in the afternoon; the sequence at west-facing Bridalveil Falls is reversed.



**The ratio of the Valley's floor widths to cliff heights ranges from 1:1 to 1.5:1, a condition that rarely occurs elsewhere.**



Seasonal change contributes significantly to the Valley's visual richness. While Yosemite has a dry, Mediterranean summer, the Valley floor and crests are at a high enough altitude to receive rain and snow at other times. Autumn and winter snows dust the cliff caps, joints and ledges to display surface details inconspicuous in the summer. Water volume of the River, supplied not only by Yosemite's famous waterfalls but also by a dozen or more perennial and intermittent creeks, doubles in the length of the Valley. The thundering white column of Yosemite Falls in May trickles to nothing in September.

The micro-climate effects transitory moods. After a storm, breaking clouds and fog alternately veil and reveal stone monuments such as Half Dome, pleasing photographers and other observers. Air currents and wet meadows can conspire to create early morning mists. Swirling winds around the base of the falls can push the water stream in one direction for a moment and in the other direction the next.

Wildlife is not as abundant in Yosemite as it is in other national parks. Black bear have been encouraged to leave the Valley. But coyote, deer and birds such as stellar jays and some raptors provide evidence of the presence of animals. Deer are

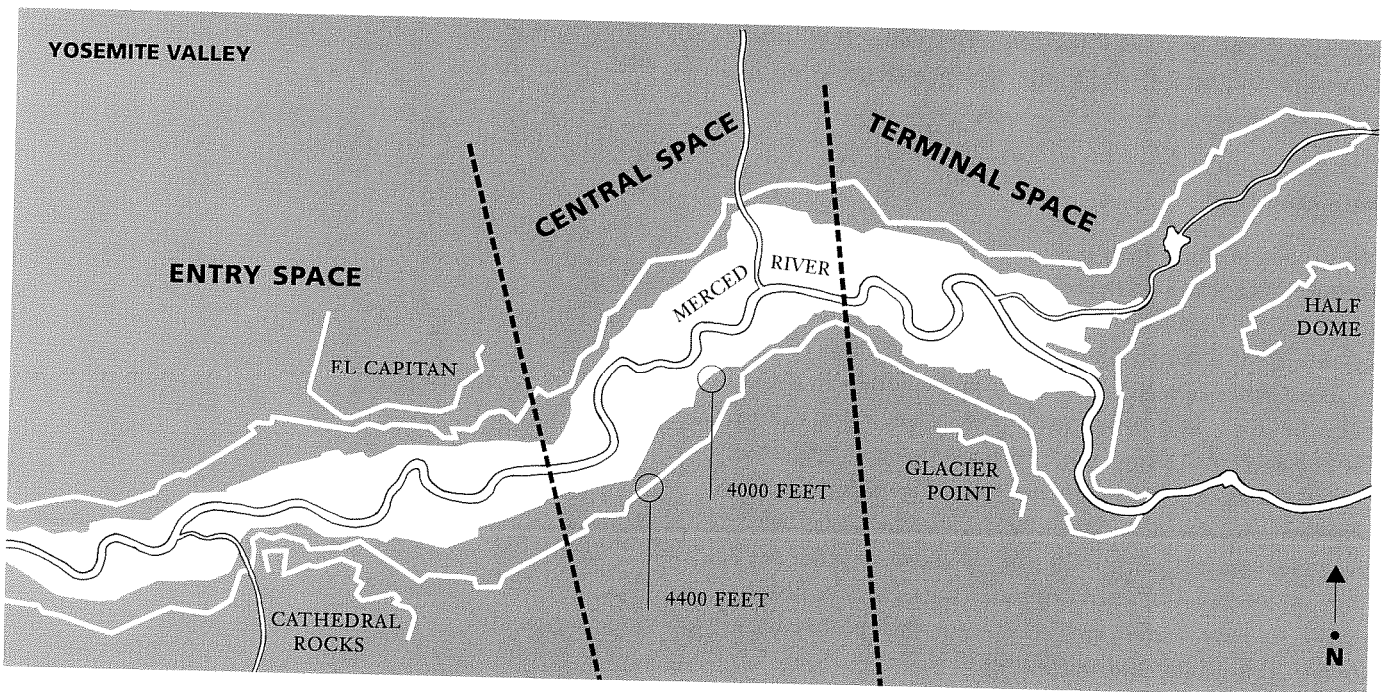
abundant, probably in excess numbers.

A final bit of ephemera—reflections on the river. When the surface velocity of the river drops to a half foot per second or less, normally during the late summer and fall, the reflected landscape joins the real one.

All these ephemeral things were at the heart of what the Hudson River School painters strived to show. The contemporary visitor is probably no less moved by them.

### Conclusion

The powerful image of Yosemite Valley springs from the insistent unity of its enclosing space. The Valley is a remarkable place, both for its easily seen, unique spatial structure, and for the diversity of what happens to be packed into that space. Its perceptual assets are such that no visitor need leave unsatisfied if the view of its features from the Valley floor are maintained.



The three spatial compartments of the Valley ground plan.