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Lessons from the Western Landscape: Environment, History, and the Lens of Ideal Planning Practice

By Jason Alexander Hayter

Abstract

This article explores how planning has accrued what can be considered an ideal of practice over a century of addressing “the city as a problem space” and uses this compound ideal as a lens to examine the Western landscape. This process of utilizing an urban-focused practice ideal on the unique environment and history of the rural West reveals, I argue, the relevance of each era’s contribution to planning’s development, the folly of relying too heavily on any one single era’s trends, and the underlying causes for much of the tumultuousness experienced over the past generation in this storied region.

If you can find a safe place by the highway, stop below the Tehachapi Pass where, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck’s Joad family was enraptured by their first view of California’s Central Valley (Steinbeck 1939). Survey some of the most productive land human civilization has ever worked. Then get in your car and make the Joad’s trip in reverse. By the time you reach eastern Oklahoma you will have traveled over 1400 miles, venturing through numerous communities set within the vast, dramatic, and storied Western landscape.

This centennial year of the first National Conference on City Planning is a fitting time to reflect on how planning has evolved over a century of addressing “the city as a problem space.” What has it learned along the way? What do its contemporary methods have to offer? The article that follows is a humanities-based exercise that intentionally avoids the standard approaches of the ivory tower, typical methodologies of the planning office, as well as the large body of literature on “urbanism,” and instead explores these questions by outlining an ideal of planning practice and applying it, not to urban spaces, but rather to the tumultuous, rural Western lands on display for a sojourning planner traveling between California and Oklahoma. Planning’s evolved framework for practice, when used as a lens to examine the rural Western landscape, can not only reveal the reasons for the volatile nature of this most American of regions,

but in doing so can demonstrate the relevance of each era's contribution to planning's development as well as the complete folly of relying too heavily on any single trend.

The Western Landscape

The West is a region worthy of examination, particularly over the past twenty years – roughly one generation. During the 1990s the West experienced explosive growth, adding over ten million new residents (U.S. Census 2001).¹ By the year 2000, 113 people were moving into the West every hour. As the first decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close, this process of villages becoming towns, towns becoming cities, and cities becoming metropolises has continued, with only the exact numbers waiting to prove what is already known.²

The most interesting challenges, however, reside in the rural and wild lands outside of the cities. The Western landscape contains many of the most powerful visual images in our national iconography.

It has been, and continues to be, the setting of many of the central narratives in American culture. It has been an almost ceaseless cornucopia, providing a forever-evolving, value-rich supply of resources. It contains some of the largest, most complex public works in the country and the world, as well as many of the most environmentally fragile and biologically essential ecosystems on the continent. And, it has been in the West where debates over the landscape, especially in regards to issues of the environment, have been, for all of its days in the Union, tumultuous and even violent in manners rivaling anything seen in cities – with the past generation being no different.

Such geographies are the material for countless volumes on political ecology, but the writer Terry Tempest Williams has summarized the situation as clearly as one can:

¹ The West is considered here as California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Idaho, Colorado, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and Wyoming. The U.S. Census also considers Alaska and Hawaii as part of the "West Region," but data from these states have been removed from the statistics herein.

² During the 1990s this region also became home to the nation's top five fastest growing states: Nevada (1), Arizona (2), Colorado (3), Utah (4), and Idaho (5), and five of its ten fastest growing metropolitan areas, Las Vegas, NV-AZ (1), Yuma, AZ (3), Boise, ID (7), Phoenix-Mesa, AZ (8), and Provo-Orem, UT (10). California added 4.1 million new inhabitants, Phoenix alone added over 1 million new residents, and Las Vegas not only added over 710,000 new residents, but also surpassed Mecca to become the most visited city on earth. (U.S. Census April 2001; Rothman 2003; Hayter 2004).

"It is a simple equation: place + people = politics. In the American West, the simplicity becomes complicated very quickly as abstractions of philosophy and rhetoric turn into ground scrimmages..."(Williams 2001, 3)

Some events from recent history that Williams uses to illustrate her point seem surreal. In 1996, when President Clinton created the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, residents of Kanab, Utah released fifty black balloons in the air, decrying "federal dictatorship" (99). Others are simply frightening. By 1998, she tells us, one hundred threats or acts occurred against federal officials on public lands in only a twelve month period (8).

That was also the year a young Texan turned Earth First! protester named David Chain died under a felled tree in the redwood forests of Humboldt County, California, attracting international media attention (Beach 2003). This was a trend of violence, however, that worked both ways. During the 1990s, and continuing into this century, the Earth Liberation Front firebombed and sabotaged locations from Vail, Colorado to the Center for Urban Horticulture at the University of Washington.

Many Americans had already associated this Western milieu with armed standoffs against anti-government groups in Idaho, Texas, and Montana, as well as the Unibomber and Timothy McVeigh. Soon, readers of national publications began seeing the word "war" used repeatedly in reference to



The Iconic West. Monumental formations along the Upper Colorado River in Grand County, Utah. Photo by author

the Western landscape and its environment: “Forest Wars” (Beach 2003), “Oregon’s Water War” (*The New York Times* 2001), and “The War Over the West” (*Time* 2001). By 2003 UT-El Paso Philosophy Professor Steven Best, when asked by *The New York Times* to explain the growing level of ecoterrorism, stated: “We are in the midst of a new civil war about the politics of nature ... Moderation hasn’t worked” (Brown 2003).

Mercifully, several years ago this turmoil all seemed to fade away from the headlines. But core issues have not improved, and many major debates that flared up over the past twenty years are still not entirely resolved. Federal lands policy under the Bush Administration was such a radical departure from previous administrations, Democrat or Republican, that a political fracturing began to make national news in 2003, and became the focus of great attention in 2008 (Harden 2003). And the passion is still there, if one looks just below the surface. In local newspapers there are stories, such as those from Santa Fe, New Mexico, where arguments over the use of trails have been breaking out into fights (Matlock 2008; Vick 2008).

When Wallace Stegner died in 1993 *The New York Times* noted that the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, famous for his works on the West, had once told a reporter that “The West is politically reactionary and exploitative ... guilty of inexplicable crimes against the land,” yet was also “the New World’s last chance to be something better” (Honan 1993). The Western landscape is powerful, volatile, and, certainly, a problem space. But, the West of the past generation is also a counterpoint to the center of planning history over the past century: the city.

A Century of Planning Trends

Planning’s core founding movements, from Howard’s Garden Cities, Olmsted’s landscapes and Burnham’s City Beautiful, to the sanitary, housing, and justice reformations, were each born of the dense, industrialized squalor and triumphal, inspirational boosterism of the late nineteenth century metropolis. They gave planning, from the outset, a systematic methodological approach, an awareness of landscape systems, a holistic view of the physical and aesthetic composition of the city, and a toolkit for guiding future urban conditions through regulations (Burnham and Bennet 1909; Peterson 1983; Hall 2002; APA 2006; Peterson, 2009). Following the first National Conference on City Planning in 1909, each subsequent era’s challenges, changes, and philosophies brought planning new tools, methods, and theories that also addressed the perceived shortcomings of the previous era.