

Americans and Their Land: The House Built on Abundance

Anne Mackin

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**AMERICANS  
AND THEIR  
LAND**

# AMERICANS AND THEIR LAND

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THE HOUSE  
BUILT ON  
ABUNDANCE

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ANNE MACKIN

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To Alex, Isara, and Isaiah,  
who opened before me  
the landscape of the heart.

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*First are the capes, then are the shorelands, now  
The blue Appalachians faint at the day rise;  
The willows shudder with light on the long Ohio:  
The lakes scatter the low sun: the prairies  
Slide out of dark: in the eddy of clean air  
The smoke goes up from the high plains of Wyoming:  
The steep Sierras arise: the struck foam  
Flames at the wind's heel on the far Pacific.*

—Archibald Macleish, “American Letter”

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## PREFACE

My first impressions of the relationship between Americans and their land came during trips to my grandparents. Every few months, my mother, brother, and I piled into the car to drive two hours south from Arlington, Virginia, to Richmond.

There, along with the corn and tomatoes they grew in their ample garden, my grandfather and grandmother gave us their stories of growing up on farms at the turn of the last century, stories of their own grandparents and a parade of middle-class ancestors—farmers and clerics—that stretched all the way back to the early European settlement of Virginia. In my mind, the mists of family history and the summer morning mist on the Virginia landscape waft together, anointing the land with the aura of ancestry.

The first critique of the American landscape I can remember hearing came from my brother when we were teenagers. He had hitchhiked to Florida to see an Apollo launch and had hiked part of the way back on the Appalachian Trail, rambling through the Smoky Mountains before returning home. “What God has done in the South is beautiful,” reported my brother, usually an avowed atheist, “but what man has done. . . .” He shook his head.

My brother’s casual assessment describes many parts of the country and is at the core of contemporary criticism of the American landscape. The common answer is that the landscape of democracy, in which everyone gets a little plot, should not necessarily be beautiful but comfortable and affordable to the majority, like a polyester leisure suit. The answer to that answer is that the American landscape expresses not the triumph of democracy so much as the triumph of capitalism.

It only takes a little travel, which I undertook occasionally in the following years, to learn that, whatever the social, legal, and economic reasons for the appearance of our landscape, that landscape expresses uniquely American attitudes toward land, resources, and community. Sorting these attitudes, I've found, could be a life's work—or the subject of a book.

After a few years of graduate school spent studying landscape architecture and planning, I worked as a planner for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I spent two years driving the highways and back roads of Massachusetts en route to some of the communities my state office was charged with visiting. As on those early trips to Richmond, when our family car passed the cheap-looking motels and Civil War markers of Route 1, I had time to wonder why people built on the land in the way that they did. In fact, it was my job to wonder. Thus began my real education.

Chats with local officials, questions and comments at public meetings—all these revealed the different economies and personalities of the communities I visited. I found towns whose fortunes had risen and fallen with ancient industries: whaling, farming, boot or textile manufacturing. Some towns were forgotten and pristine; some forgotten and derelict. Some had been overrun by modern development and were now barely recognizable as distinct places amid the sprawling development around them. Some little towns threw tremendous energy and goodwill into the struggle for self-improvement, and some thumbed their noses at the idea of accepting so much as a street tree from state government. Others still—typically the affluent communities with much to protect—operated sophisticated planning agencies of their own with powerful boards overseeing zoning and other aspects of development.

In all of these communities, the compelling force that shaped the land did not arise in any of the programs of state government—designed to preserve some of the natural beauty and cultural history of the Massachusetts landscape—but with the powerful forces of commerce. Compared to the robust pressures of real estate development, the efforts of government appeared relatively fragile and ineffectual.

The cultural forces shaping the landscape became even clearer to me after I left my state job, returned to writing part-time (mostly about planning), and had children. For the first time, the commercial strip



became part of my life as I strapped my first little toddler into her car seat and headed for Toys R Us and Chuck E. Cheese on a rainy day.

Suddenly, I owned my own car—instead of sharing or avoiding them—and by the time the children were preschoolers, I was using the drive-through lane at McDonald's when caught off-guard by squalls of hunger from the backseat. I had to admit the developers of sprawl were on to something. With the marketer's honed instincts about the lifestyles of middle-class families, the many corporations whose logos lined the strip had anticipated my needs and the needs of other parents and had answered with the lowest common denominator.

Although my forays to the strip lasted only until my second child entered school, I understood my collusion with the developers of junk environments. The careless, disposable quality of this hawking landscape interested me, as did the easy plasticity with which it was molded, and the abundance of land that permitted it. Surely, the cultural attitudes that created this landscape resulted from centuries of enjoying land so abundant, and government strictures so loose, that the land was used as casually as any modern, throwaway plastic utensil might be.

With the vague idea of a book in mind, I began years of on-and-off research on the history of settlement patterns and the distribution of land in America. Through all of this, I have come to believe that we cannot fully understand our modern society and its relationship to the land and resources on which it relies without understanding Americans' historic relationship to their land—a resource once so abundant as to seem limitless. But, as many have come to realize, what abundance set in motion, it cannot sustain. The cultural changes that we see in our modern society are brought about in part by a dramatically different ratio of people to resources than that experienced by our distant ancestors. It is important, I think, to make these changes as consciously as possible and to understand their causes and consequences, as well as the consequences of failing to make certain choices that we have not yet been able to make.