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To Rally Discussion

Change Of Footing, Change Of Venue

We have been used to thinking of our relation to landscapes as a horizontal affair. The American pioneer past is too close, the American ambition too grand not to conceive of simply walking out a rough hewn door to penetrate a wilderness of forest paths, out another door of grandeur to cultivate one's manor garden. This face-to-face connection to the landscape, on one's own—really a foot-to-foot control of the land around—once seemed proper or virtuous or both, according to one's rank. In time, it became acceptable to extend this virtue by rolling across vast terrain in covered vehicles, wagons or trains, "roomlets" with fabric or metal doors from which one could put one's foot down often enough to scale and control the landscapes around.

A strong distrust of urban configurations, which increased both architectural and human densities, threatened such individual, virtuous control of landscapes—thus, the popularity of the suburban house with its one-to-one, out-the-door-into-the-garden relationship. The same notion seems to lie behind the recent flurry of art parks. There, strolling from sculpture to environment to pit, we can meet the thoughts of others foot-to-foot. Earlier, the American cemetery tradition of rolling tombstoned lawns suggested that negotiating such landscape relationships would

gain us a more final landscape, a heavenly layout of lush gardens in which we might forever stroll.

But these heavens were not attained on foot. In art, souls or whole bodies were changed from one level to another by winged angels. Once off their feet, some wished to investigate more terrain with their own wings, and like Chagall, they dreamed of levitation. A higher vantage point reveals the ongoing dialogue between house and garden or house and street.

We commonly use pressurized boxes with metal wings to project ourselves from one landscape to another, speedily ignoring the greater area of land between the two ends. We stay in boxes, even ones that don't physically fly, designing simul-scapes. Our cottage computers can electronically simulate environments and landscapes that may move in any direction except the one in which we jog out the door onto a street or a mountain path.

There were earlier attempts to change the door-to-garden landscape relationship. Combinations we expected to see on the ground were elevated above us into the sky, certain and heavy in stone. In the cathedral at Laon, France, there are stone oxen thrusting inquisitively out of columniated stalls at the tops of the towers. The

beasts must be in the fields of heaven. To walk these particular fields requires real foot control to mount 280 steps from the base of the cathedral. But from the public paths of the town their startling appearance calls forth the legend that mysterious white oxen appeared in the nights during the construction of the cathedral, to fly up with the heavy stone while others slept. Sharing the view from below is a communal, public experience.

Today, our urban environment, which contains many of our public spaces, is marked by economically standardized boxes with poorly integrated landscapes, or worse, with none at all. These sins of omission and commission come from both individual carelessness and thoughtless design. Perhaps we must learn to replace the open fields and grand allees with small, intensely imagined places that can aerate urban densities. To make fully inhabited landscapes, we must design these landscapes to be both physically and visually shared by many people at many different times and from many different angles. Cultivating our own gardens may be the first step, but we need to engage the ascending path of imagination to secure communal landscapes that cannot be possessed by individual hands and feet.

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