

1-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Ballard, Jan (1994) "The Golf Course, Landscape, and Ideology: Symbols of Dominant Culture in Mid-19th and Late 20th Century America," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 16.

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THE GOLF COURSE, LANDSCAPE AND IDEOLOGY: SYMBOLS OF DOMINANT CULTURE IN MID-19TH AND LATE 20TH CENTURY AMERICA*

Jan Ballard

"Cultural landscape has cultural meaning."—Pierce F. Lewis

"We can read the landscape as we might read a book."—Mae Thielgaard Watts

As I drive through the countryside, my photographer's eye searches the horizons for those views which seem compelling in the arrangement of natural phenomena. I look at the way a wooded hillside of a valley falls away into the distance or at a glint of light reflected from the river, which also reflects a grove of birch trees growing close to the water's edge. As I drive on, the view changes and I become more aware of the intervention of culture into the arrangements which I see. The land forms of geologic interest, such as waterways and dunes in West Michigan, have been altered by the culture which has settled on the land. Driveways jut from stands of pine leading back into private drives. Weathered piers are also reflected in the river. Fences surround artificial divisions of the land into property. Riding lawnmowers roar over a green acreage where a volleyball net divides the field into sections.

Deborah Bright suggests that in order to understand landscape in the 20th century, one might look at the practice of landscape architecture.¹ One of the more interesting examples of human intervention in the "natural lay of the land" is the golf course. It is ordered and groomed and fully represents the culture at large.

THE GAME

The game of golf is currently one of the most popular and lucrative entertainments in America. The form of the game acts as a guide for the player, providing interesting views on successive tees. The golf course and the game are constructs of culture. A player's visual experience of land on the course is constructed through the game, but an observer of land can look more deeply into this phenomenon.

The contemporary golf course is a vernacular landscape of late 20th century capitalism. As such it can be interpreted to embody and foreground the imperatives of that ideology. Seen by the player against the backdrop of the game, land and

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natural phenomena are stripped of their primary meaning and encoded to represent strategy, competition and individual improvement.

Contemporary golf courses are man-made artifacts, and, like any gameboard, a course presents obstacles to the player. The object of the game, to sink a ball into a small target by using only a prescribed number of shots, could in itself be a significant challenge to any player. But course design will also be a factor in the player's perception of its difficulty and memory of the land.

All contemporary courses have similar elements of tee, fairway and green. Courses are created through "landscape architecture," which places natural and artificial hazards like sand, water and rough vegetation "to create the flow." Variations on these elements are based on whether or not the original terrain is interesting in itself and also on the budget allowed the designer. Other variations between courses occur because of the use of more or less incline or "undulation" in



Man-made hill; mowed fairway with undulations (#14).

the lay of the land.

Historically, the development of landscape architecture on the golf-course parallels contemporary culture's ability to re-shape natural phenomena into suitable artifacts. Equipment improvements and advances in agricultural methods during the 20th century have aided in this pursuit. Today anything is possible, as long as the budget allows, and courses can be graded to follow the plan in only a few days. F.W. Hawtree writes that the technology of construction equipment has "advanced to the point where, if necessary, sites formerly considered unsuitable, like rubbish tips, can be landscaped, planted and transformed into things of beauty—at a cost."² Like all forms of cultural artifacts, the golf-course speaks about the attitudes and assumptions of the culture which creates it.

The golf course may be seen as a kind of amusement ride designed to thrill and test a player's courage, in which, after having paid the fee, a player moves from one land form to another in an attempt to master the course. The experience results in the affirmation of assumptions about the individual in competition, but it also places land and nature in a position subservient to those ideas.

One may see similarities in the construct of the golf-course to other artifacts of western culture. For instance, it is possible to compare the landscaped golf course with landscape paintings and photographs, because landscape as a genre of art also reveals attitudes of the cultural parent. Such a comparison reveals that attitudes of contemporary culture about land are related to those of the 19th century, which included those of ownership and control, and which were central to Westward Expansion and the development of the West in the United States.

LANDSCAPE AND IDEOLOGY

It will be useful here to distinguish between several words. "Land" describes geology and is outside of human history. "Landscape" refers to a representation of land in the form of a cultural artifact.³ "Landscaping" is the term used to refer to the practice of creating an interesting or pleasant view of land by its re-arrangement and/or decorative treatment. Landscape itself can be divided into a number of categories, from the vernacular to the fine art. Vernacular landscape exists in the world because of some human intervention. Vernacular landscape refers to those views available to anyone who stands in a particular place: the Disney picture spot, for instance, or the view from a lookout-point in a park or other preserve. Some confusion may arise in the colloquial usage of the term landscape when it is used to refer to a pleasant, or unpleasant, view from a particular vantage point. In this case the term "view" is more precise.

Fine art landscape uses land as subject matter, expressing a particular point of view, but it can also be interpreted to represent human or artistic ideas outside land. Some recurring thematic concerns in artistic landscape are "landscape as salvation," "landscape as property," "landscape as recreation," and "landscape as picture making." Here the representation of land is like an armature which supports other ideas.

"Landscape as salvation" refers to a 19th century belief in the transformative properties of nature. Images based on this idea usually do not show the effects of culture. Land and nature are rendered as if to give the viewer a sense of first-hand experience. "Landscape as property" represents artificial boundaries set by a particular culture or cultures. These images tend to confirm ownership of land as well as spheres of influence in different cultures. Contemporary work, for instance, is being done about the border between the United States and Mexico. "Landscape as recreation" refers to traditions related to the hunt. Images based on this idea show the beauty and bountiful fruits of land. "Landscape seen as picture-making" refers only to the making of representations. Here, simulated views of land sometimes quote other well-known images or subordinate the elements of land into the elements of pictures. Thus, rivers and streams become curved lines, rocks and trees become masses of different weight, and light effects are used to unify or disjoint the view.



Re-seeded fairway turf with netting (#14).



Man-made hill with wildflowers below tee (#17).

It is possible to trace changes in the representations of landscape through Western art history and, by doing so, see changes in the philosophical and ideological ideas contained in them. It is useful to do this in order to see some similarities with the contemporary golf course. Beginning in the pre-Romantic period in Europe and England, we see changes occurring for two hundred years which reflect the dominant culture's philosophic ideas.

Classical landscape painting was primarily used as a backdrop or stage setting for the heroic actions of kings and aristocrats. Later, the Romantic Period in England freed landscape painting from functional representation. Like the Romantic poets who preceded them in the early 19th century, Romantic painters created descriptions of nature from a subjective point of view. The English painter Turner provides the most extreme example, for, in his paintings, color itself is released from defining outlines to "express its nature as well as the painter's emotion."⁴

Stylistic shifts in art forms can be seen as responses to other art forms, with adjustments taking place in degrees of opposition to what has gone before. Shifts in artistic styles also reflect shifts in the underlying concerns of the period. John Constable, a contemporary of Turner, also moved away from classical landscape painting, but with a different result. "His concern was for the real and his landscapes show careful studied views of the English countryside of the mid-19th century painted with local color of the forests, fields and skies."⁵ He paints farmers in every day activities and simulates the fleeting quality of light. His concern with the realist style reflects the rising importance of science in his time.

The realist position in literature and art was supported by scientific advances of the mid-19th century. The theory of scientific positivism argued that facts were the only verifiable basis of knowledge. Theories unproven by science were relegated to the categories of fiction or illusion. Realism in the art of the 19th century can be seen as having two components, the technical and the iconographic.⁶ Technical realism is the representation of an optical field by matching color and tones on a flat surface. Technical realism was aided by the development of photography and the introduction of the wet-plate process in 1850.⁷ Iconographic realism, on the other hand, is the representation of everyday contemporary life as seen by the artist. Iconographic realism is a subjective experience not unlike the romantic impulse.

Prior to 1855, most American landscape painters worked in the Romantic style, which stressed imagination over naturalism. However, the subjectivism of Romanticism did not fit a lens-derived photographic representation of nature. Wet-plate photography began to influence the representation of nature. Its influence coincides with that of British writer John Ruskin, who had published a five volume treatise on the representation of land in art and literature. In his writings, Ruskin considered many media, including photography. He argued that nature itself has a deep relationship to human emotion. Despising the "pathetic fallacy" in literature and pictorial representation which veils the subject and one's ability to perceive.⁸ Ruskin believed that the use of too much emotion in art would hide the reality of nature, which was worth experiencing because of its "transformative" power. The concept that "nature" could change the human spirit came from the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, who argued that the idea of landscape rests in the mind. According to this theory, it is possible to have a sublime or transformative experience through a heightened awareness of nature. In order for this to happen, one must have first hand experience.⁹

Much of landscape photography during the 1860s and 1870s had been labeled documentary because it was done as part of government surveys and expeditions in the American West.¹⁰ This era created the assumption that photographs were objective and recorded the facts of existence. The realism of a photograph taken from a select vantage point seemed remarkable in descriptive detail for viewers who sought that transformative experience.

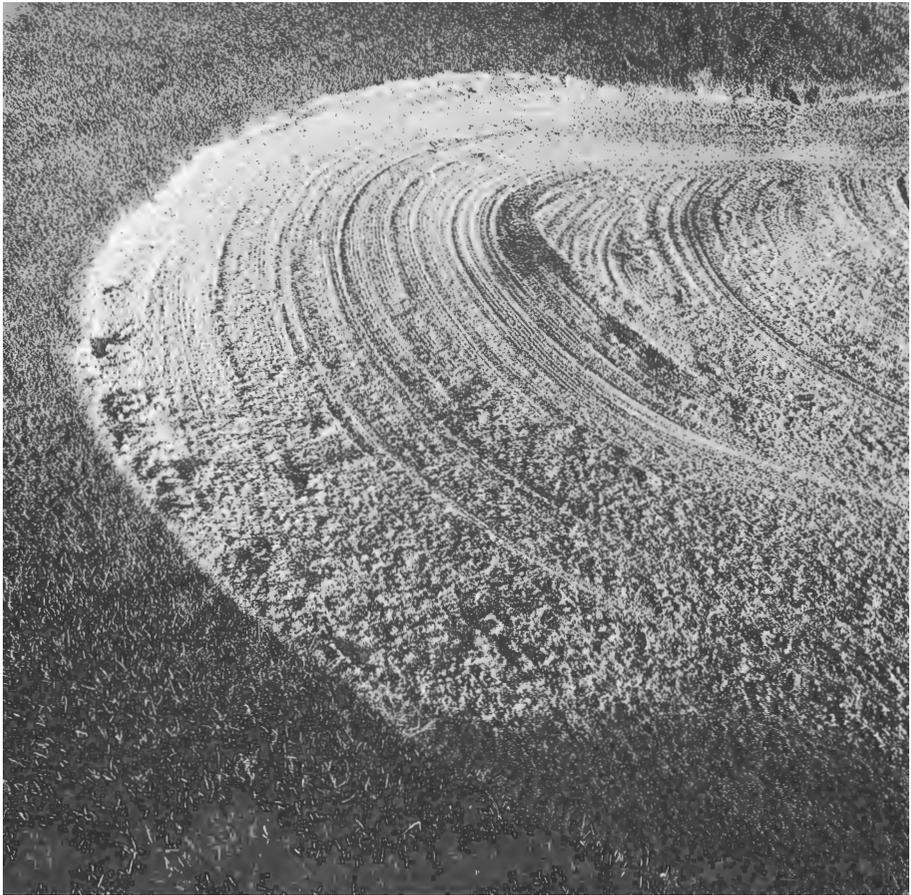
If the goal of viewing a work of art then was similar to taking a walk in the woods, the experience of either would confirm Christian beliefs in the existence of and one's proximity to a creator. Becoming re-affirmed in this ideology had secondary results



Leaves over mowed green (#9) showing three levels of grass height for green, apron and rough.

and implications for 19th century America. In the case of sublime transformations, members of the dominant culture were allowed a second guiltless association with land and nature. Just outside the dramatic views of landscape paintings and photographs, natural resources were being mined and logged with all speed and efficiency. George Dimmock writes of the simultaneous activities of clear-cutting the sides of mountains and the creation of Yosemite National Monument.¹¹ Yosemite was created in an effort to preserve the unique phenomena of the natural forest for future generations and to provide tourists with its personal, and transformative, experience. Large format photographic views by Carleton Watkins of Yosemite Valley were used as visual evidence of its beauty in congressional discussions of the project.

European settlers believed that the benevolent creator had given them the North American continent to use, and also to own. Ideology became justification for



Raked sand bunker along fairway (#9).

material culture. Westward Expansion in America represents the desire to control and harvest natural resources and, simultaneously, to spread ideology as justification.

LANDSCAPING

Our contemporary understanding of the vernacular landscape has been altered by the 19th century concept of parks, which as J.B. Jackson writes, "evolved from the aristocratic garden, which emphasized passive enjoyment. The American park of the mid 19th century was essentially a designed, picturesque landscape which included lawns, bodies of water, artfully located groves of trees. . . meant to provide contact with nature to the public."¹² The philosophy of transformation was a part of the park concept. The "myth of Arcadia" or a desire to return to a simpler life based

on contact with nature was spread through magazines and popular literature during the second half of the 19th century. At the end of the century, cities had become crowded and unpleasant places to live in, with few areas of fresh air. Public parks were first created in order to give immigrants and working class people some fresh air and escape from the otherwise confining city. "Fresh air funds" were started by reform movements for city school children, to get them into the country for "day camp." The wealthy, in order to participate in the Arcadia myth, formed country clubs, where activities such as fox hunting, golf and croquet were included as part of the membership.¹³ When we look at the contemporary golf course, we wonder if these ideas about Arcadia and transcendence aren't somehow involved in the design.

It is true that picturesque views are part of the experience of golf, and that a two-to-three-hour round is a first hand interactive experience, but, on the course, one is



Standing water prior to re-seeding at base of raised landform tee (#15).

no longer concerned with the effects of nature on one's psyche. Rather one is concerned with skill, strategy and competition. Since the player is attempting to master the course, the relationship with its simulation seems adversarial at the least, and the possibility of an emotion (other than frustration) in respect to nature seems remote.

LANDSCAPING AND CULTURAL IMPLICATION

What is the function of land on a golf course? How is the land used? What implications are evident in the way late 20th century capitalism views land? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to look at landscaping of the golf course. The contemporary course is a designed vernacular landscape, an artifact which represents land in a certain way; and, where nature meets culture, culture demands certain things of nature.

The arrangement of a golf course reveals the dramatic features of a piece of land, if there are any to be seen. But this is only a secondary concern. Any good design will require various levels of skill from an individual player while she or he is being led around to experience these dramatic (or semi-dramatic) features. The contemporary course is designed primarily to give the player enough challenge that strategy will play an important part in the game.

Historically, the game of golf grew to its present shape over a long period of time. Originally called links, courses were developed on rugged British terrain during the 19th century.¹⁴ Land which was sometimes used for the grazing of herds included a variety of bluffs, sand dunes and tall grasses. These land forms had been created by the natural action of wind and tides. Cross winds added a natural hazard to the game.

As the game grew more popular in America during the early 20th century, courses were built on land which wasn't suited for farming. Early 20th century tees and greens were constructed as raised landforms by the use of "mule teams and drag pans,"¹⁵ where mule teams pulled a scoop behind the team driver. This "drag" would collect and re-distribute the earth to a new destination in order to sculpt the final contours. "Fairways," the land between the tee and green, were left relatively untouched. Players walked through different types of vegetation to get to the green.

For various reasons, contemporary courses are now created artificially. They are usually constructed on land left over after the more interesting sites have been used for the development of homes or resorts. Heavy earth-moving equipment was introduced into the process after World War Two.¹⁶ Landforms can be created easily with bulldozers and front-end loaders. Following the architect's plan, a dozer crew of specialty operators takes very little time to change the face of a piece of land. Turf is then built up and maintained by the use of pesticides and fertilizers. The results are repeatable land formations with specific strategic merit and a uniform color and surface on the playing field.

Original courses may still be interesting to golfers for the natural manner of their formation, but contemporary courses are an example of the desire and ability to



Wooded wetlands and native grasses at back of green (#1) showing undulations and bunker.

create a totally man-made and more challenging environment. Requirements for the architect's design include supplying that which will satisfy the needs of the game, as well as the desires of the players or club, and more recently, because of legal pressures, maintaining the pre-existing natural environment. For instance, current federal law prohibits the disturbance of natural wet-lands, which serve as migratory habitats and flood planes for streams or rivers.¹⁷ Contemporary landscape architects need to be aware of the presence of such land and to consider it in their design. When a design is successful, it will highlight the natural terrain and also make use of its ecological importance.

In looking at the Meadows Golf Course, one can see the result of such accommodation. The Meadows, at Grand Valley State University, was designed by Dr. Michael Herdzon. Many of Dr. Herdzon's designs have won awards. Prior to his designing the course, all the wet-land areas were identified by the State Department

of Natural Resources. This assessment set some boundaries for the design of the playing field.

The creation of such hazards as water reservoirs and sand bunkers held in by bulkheads constructed of wood or rock adds challenge to the strategy of the game. Earth taken from one place in order to create a man-made lake can be taken to another location and built into a hilly formation. There are two man-made lakes at the Meadows. The original piece of land had been fields, which were relatively flat before construction. All undulations, hills, and valleys had to be created. Variations in the level of the playing surface can create difficulty in strategy or can sometimes help a player to determine visually the best approach to the green. This re-arrangement of existing grades into new hills, valleys and levels can sometimes cause water run-off into undesirable areas of the playing field. Run-off will form catch basins and sometimes create the need for underground drains and storm sewers under tees and



Lone elm as visual marker between two fairways (#1 and #10).

greens. During construction at the Meadows, all original surface turf was removed by heavy equipment. An underground irrigation system was placed beneath the surface, built for the daily watering requirements of the specific grasses used on tees, fairways and greens. Bulldozers followed the plan to build up the tees, greens and bunkers, and then the grounds-keeper re-seeded the land. The course had been scheduled to open during July, 1993, but wet weather and drainage problems slowed development of the new turf. As a result, the Meadows course was delayed in opening until the Spring of 1994.

Visual and strategic elements can add psychological stress to the game. Sight lines and sloping fairways are part of contemporary design and give visual cues to a player. In some cases, standing trees are removed, because they are in the line of play. The design at the Meadows removed very few trees. A wooded patch surrounds one area of wetlands near M-45 along the north edge of the course. A very old single elm tree was left as a visual marker between two fairways. Many new trees were also planted to mark the design and add other visual interest.

Another method of challenging the player is through sand bunkers. These pits come in many shapes and depths. The traps are filled with sand of a specific size, uniform in color and weight, and players are required to re-rake the surface after use. All hazards are methods of challenging the player to make deliberate decisions about how to play a hole.¹⁸

Green maintenance is one of the most costly budget items of any course. The greens are usually built from three distinct layers of soil.¹⁹ These are designed so that they will drain well in order to soak, but not drown, the roots of the specialty grasses. The spongy carpet of grass is kept short to allow the ball to roll freely. Skill in making an approach shot to the green requires that the player land the ball where it will not roll away from the pin. Contemporary greens are sometimes built to slant away from the pin, making this shot more difficult. The greens can also include both undulations and deep sand bunkers and are made "fast" by the eradication of weeds with pesticides and the fertilization of only desired grasses.²⁰ The long term effect of pesticides and fertilizers in the run-off to natural drainage areas should also be incorporated into the architect's design.

D.W. Meinig defines several ways of interpreting a vernacular landscape and the implications of each. In his discussion of landscape as ideology, he points out clues to a system of values which underlie the philosophies of a culture.²¹ The contemporary golf course can be seen as an attempt to improve the look of land from a number of successive points of view. In this way, it is about viewing. At each vantage point a player is looking at the land forms for clues as to the next best move, but not really at the land for its own sake. The player moves through the constructed landscape in an attempt to control it through the game. Land does not represent itself as natural phenomena, but as a means to an end. It has been bent to accommodate the elements of the game. Like the paintings of the 19th century, designed to give the viewer a feeling of transcendence in nature, the contemporary golf course provides a player with an interactive equivalent, but for a different result.

As a game, golf represents challenge to the individual. Through the game, a player comes into close contact with the ideals of competition, strategy and self-improvement. Mainstream American culture is founded on ideals of individualism, progress and dominance. One might reasonably conclude that the experience provided each player by the golfcourse re-affirms these ideals. Ironically, the contestant is playing on a field which has already been tamed.

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- ¹Bright, Deborah. "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography". *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Ed. Richard Bolton. Boston: MIT Press, 1990. Bright's challenge has been the original point of departure for my continuing investigation into landscape photography.
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- ⁵de la Croix. 832.
- ⁶de la Croix. 832.
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- ¹⁴Doak, Tom. *The Anatomy of a Golf Course*. NY: Lyons and Burford Publ., 1992. 8.
- ¹⁵Doak. 11.
- ¹⁶Hawtree. 37.
- ¹⁷Doak. 21.
- ¹⁸Hawtree. 111.
- ¹⁹Doak. 113.
- ²⁰Doak. 112.
- ²¹Meinig, D.W. "The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene." *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1979. 42.