

Introduction

What Makes a Place Scenic?

IN 1972, frustrated with the limitations of conventional graduate training in landscape architecture, I founded an innovative, intensive, one-year graduate program in landscape design and planning that operated out of a small sugarhouse and barn on my property in Conway, Massachusetts. The curriculum combined classroom teaching and field trips with practical experience—real design and planning projects for clients over a range of scales—in ten intensive months. For two decades I was the director and learned at least as much from the students as they did from me.

Each September, I started the year by loading the students into a van and embarking on a ten-day trip through New England and two Canadian provinces. The purpose of the trip, in addition to creating a bond among a group of adults with a wide range of backgrounds, was to introduce them to some basic questions of design: What makes a landscape noteworthy? What elements contribute to a feeling of coherence? How does that inform our understanding of what design entails?

The discussion began the minute the van left the barn and small sugarhouse that constituted the Conway campus, in the rural hills of western Massachusetts, and it continued nonstop for the next ten months. As we headed north on Interstate 91 from Massachusetts into Vermont, on our way to Montreal and Quebec, I used every minute



The Conway School van became a mobile classroom for the first ten days of the year.

to challenge students to open their minds, to let go of old assumptions, to see with new eyes the landscape unrolling before them.

Reflections on a rural landscape

What makes a landscape scenic? It's 1976, and I have just posed this question to a group of graduate students sitting behind me in a tan 15-passenger Dodge van as we head north into Vermont's hilly agricultural landscape. After some thought, the students begin to offer ideas about what makes the surrounding landscape attractive. At first, their comments focus on taking **inventory**, listing the elements in the landscape: the mountain ridgelines,



The Vermont landscape illustrates how landform shapes its use.

the forested hills, a tumbling stream, a rocky outcrop, an eye-catching village or farm complex.

Their inventory continues with a closer examination of the open fields, the colors and crops in the fields, and the contrast between forest and fields. Comments slow down as the obvious bits of inventory add up. For a while, the van is quiet as students watch the passing landscape.

After a bit, and with prompting, they begin to notice **relationships**: fields are predominantly on the flatter lands, the flat lands are largely adjacent to the road; buildings are mostly grouped or clustered; rivers and streams create an irregular contrast to the otherwise geometric fields. Noting these relationships leads the students to see how topography influences land use: the steepest slopes are mostly wooded, occasional orchards step down more gentle slopes,

rolling lands are hayed or used for pastures, and croplands generally cover the lowlands.

The dominant characteristic, they note, is the rolling landform, particularly evident when some of the land is cleared. They notice how the fields radiate outward from the farm buildings, often climbing up the gentler slopes, shaping and defining a working landscape. They observe that the entire farmstead is within a larger topographic bowl; the forested hills embrace the agricultural landscape, providing a sense of enclosure and protection. There is a sense of mystery as a farm road disappears behind some trees.

Within that larger landscape, they begin to identify smaller distinct spaces, created or outlined by streams, hedgerows, and stone walls and often dedicated to specific uses—a change of crop, a pasture for grazing animals, a staging area for harvesting, a place to store vehicles. They identify specific details connected to life on the land, such as the streams that wind around and sometimes through the farmstead, draining fields and providing irrigation and water for the animals.

They observe that the predominant woodland context provides contrast in form, texture, and color and reveals where and why the early farmers claimed certain lands for production and others for pasture.

They quickly conclude that the topography of the land has shaped everything that has happened on it, that design responds to the undulating landform, which gives it a logical coherence. This coherence creates a landscape we can understand, appreciate, and come to love.

The observations about how these farms are laid out leads some students to muse on history and climate. They conclude that early farmers in New England knew that winter was something to contend with. One student

Clustered by the road and below a protective hillside, these farm buildings look out over a rich landscape.



notices how, unlike some newer houses they've seen, the buildings are sited below ridgelines, protected from winter winds and subservient to the commanding landscape. Buildings are clustered and often physically connected to provide sheltered access at all times of the year. They observe how buildings frequently form an enclosure, U- or L-shaped, creating a south- or southeast-facing pocket in which the majority of outdoor work takes place. Animals and humans alike are seen sheltered in these climatically advantageous places.

They also note how farmers gave precedence to the valuable productive lands by clustering buildings tightly, reducing their footprint. Conversely they can't help but call out the occasional incongruent ranch home in the middle of a field or a McMansion claiming and disrupting a ridgeline.

Having passed perhaps a dozen such farms, a student notices how a single color or a simple architectural style unifies multiple farm buildings. Despite the great variety in size and function, there is an obvious coherence of design by roofline, materials, color, and juxtaposition. This strong architectural vernacular appeals to him.

Another student notes that not only are buildings typically clustered but they also typically hug the road. Life here is lived close to the road. What appear to be

multigenerational farms are occasionally bisected by a road, leaving the original homestead, garage, and sheds on one side and larger barns on the other. When asked, that student agrees that the road has become part of the farm's circulation system and in fact is subservient to the farm itself.

Yet another student comments that the corn and hay fields come right down to the road; there is no intervening fence, curb, or shoulder between road and field, rendering the scene simple and especially appealing. Simplicity and proximity are key characteristics of this rural landscape.

Looking in greater detail, the students begin to notice the smaller features that add richness and meaning to the landscape. They have already noted how historic stone walls, drainage ways, and occasional fences create distinct outdoor "rooms." Now they observe how each of these features provides a way to measure the landscape: by gauging the size of a field from the animals grazing there, the overall scale of the farm seems larger, where the context of wooded hillsides had diminished it.

Earlier in our trip, the students noted the pattern of woodlands surrounding an open field. Now—in a discussion that comes surprisingly late in the conversation for budding landscape designers—they consider the contribution of individual trees and shrubs to the

scenic and functional aspects of the built landscape. Most trees on these farms serve a clear purpose: the sugar bush brings in the season's first cash crop; the mature trees in the farmyard provide necessary shade in the summer, as does the occasional wolf tree in the pasture. A bank of evergreens to the northwest of the farmhouse buffers winter winds.

They have already noticed that the transition from field to forest is abrupt. They now observe that very few shrubs have been introduced, except in close proximity to the homes. There one finds some fruiting trees and shrubs in addition to perennial beds and a kitchen garden.

One student notes an exception: What about over there? she asks, pointing to a field dotted with low evergreen shrubs. The rocky and sloping field was once a pasture. When no longer grazed, junipers moved in, followed by other pioneer species such as cherry and birch, and the slow succession to forest got underway. There is something appealing about that landscape, she comments. Indeed, these transitional rolling pastures are beautiful, with a rich ecology that supports wildlife, but they are also a sad indication of an abandoned farm.

The road as designed landscape

How well does this highway fit with the landscape?

I shift the focus of the discussion by asking students to look for any incongruities or disruptions to the landscape. They note the utility poles but quickly allow that the simple poles with only a few wires can cross a field without becoming overbearing; the ones that parallel the road allow them to focus on the land beyond. Roadside hedgerows often help to obscure the wires and transformers.

The highway we are on, Interstate 91, running north through Vermont, has won awards for its design. The students begin to explore what aspects helped it to achieve harmony within the landscape.

Here the highway has just two lanes in each direction; the curves are sinuous and flowing. The horizontal and vertical alignments of the north- and southbound portions are shaped by the land. At times the change in elevation from west to east means one half of the highway is hidden by a sloping median with mature trees and rock outcrops. The pavement is about 24 feet wide plus shoulders; it is built of concrete and in good repair. They note the coming and going of metal guardrails, periodic signs, and evident vigilant maintenance—initially, mostly inventory. Then once again, they begin to speak about relationships.

The view from the highway presents the adjacent landscape in increments, they observe, bending around a corner to reveal first the fields opening out from the pinch of woodlands, then presenting farm buildings in their volume, complexity, and close juxtaposition. This unfolding mystery is part of what makes the landscape enticing. They note how the road hugs one side of the valley, then crosses and follows the opposite edge, sometimes paralleling a river or stream along the farm fields.

Shaped by mountains and rivers, the roads in Vermont are sinuous and scenic.



They describe how the road directly mimics the contours of the landscape through which it is climbing, how transitions in road inclines and curves reflect the underlying topographic nature. One student says she can feel the contours of the land as we drive along, as her body shifts from one side to the other around curves and changes in grade. This physical response is an important part of how we come to know the land we are traversing.

When initially asked to observe the landscape, these students—like the classes before and after them—didn't consider the roadway as part of the scenic vista. But through this exercise, they began to realize how big a role the road itself plays in how we perceive the land. Indeed, they conclude, there are numerous ways this road responds to the landscape: the changing distance and proximity to key features like the farms and villages; the enticing mystery of what is anticipated around the bend; the absence of fences and walls between the working landscape and the road; the way the road changes in response to nature's hills and valleys and river crossings.

Looking at these larger patterns leads to another observation: like the farmsteads, the villages are tucked into the confluence of roads and rivers. That context gives meaning to the settlements, helping us understand why the villages sprang up here. One student notes how the road

gives wide berth to certain valued landscapes: community burial grounds, historic villages, farms, groves of trees, and occasional wetlands. Protecting these resources is an expression of respect.

The students' perceptions have moved from initial recognition and **inventory**, to more complete **description** of prominent components, to the discovery of **relationships** and ultimately **patterns**. They realize that this attractive landscape is a combination of an evolving pattern of farm field, stream, woodland, and roadway superimposed on a landform that changes on a geologic timeframe.

When I call attention to **proportions** they correctly identify the built landscape as subservient to the larger more natural landscape—a proportion preferable to one in which they are more equally competing. There is a **coherence** to the various elements within the built landscape—buildings, walls, fences, driveways, silos, steeples, even utilities—that expresses their function within the larger whole.

I press them to summarize their observations. Initially, the focus was on contrasts in the landscape: wooded versus open, built versus farmed, flat versus sloping, and sunny versus shady, simple versus complex—all components of our mural-like landscape.

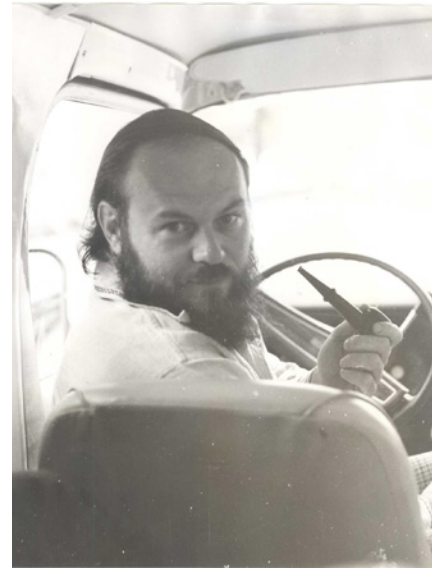
Despite the obvious contrasts, they acknowledge an underlying order of the landscape, a visible purpose to this rural landscape, which provides a strong sense of place. I point out how central and essential these ingredients and elements are to design.

Through this exercise—asking what makes a larger landscape scenic or a road fit well within the landscape—I hope to elicit from the students some of the lessons the world around us has to teach about design. It takes more than a few hours in a van to understand what makes a landscape scenic. But these initial guided observations provide the students with a common language, a discerning eye, and a discipline that, with persistence, will lead to larger and often powerful discoveries about landscape design.

The trip will continue, to the urban centers of Quebec City and Montreal, through smaller villages with their own historically influenced design, and finally with close attention to residential landscapes. (A narrative of the remainder of the trip, **Clues from the Built Landscape**, is included in the Appendix.) Throughout the next ten months, these students will be studying all scales of design, building on the vocabulary they are already developing. Whether assessing land use at a regional scale or designing an intimate residential garden, many of the skills required are the same.

Despite the broad range of academic and professional backgrounds, every one of these students made cogent observations and connections from the very beginning of the year. No uncommon language or particular professional training is necessary to begin understanding and interpreting the landscape. The vocabulary goes well beyond plants, although the perception outside the field is that landscape designers primarily create gardens. The fledgling designers at the Conway School were already considering everything from watersheds to local infiltration basins, from regional circulation patterns to the location of village parking and pedestrian connections, from the ecological services of unfragmented forests to the use of domestic vegetation to reduce residential energy costs. All scales are of legitimate concern for the planner-designer, and in fact these professions—planning and design—are on a continuum.

We all have the observational powers and the language to identify and share common principles that shape design—principles that will be addressed throughout this book. All it takes is a curious, questioning mind to tease out the design principles at play, to understand that design is everywhere. A landscape designer needs to develop a disciplined and sustained focus—the mental intention to extract meaning through disciplined observation.



Walt in his role as driver and professor, as many of the early classes at the Conway School saw him.