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Re-Reading Cultural Geography by Kenneth E. Foote

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auditorium's walls; films and three-screen slide presentations—mostly created by Eames and Nelson themselves—flashed on the screen; and a collection of bottled synthetic odors wafted through the air conditioning ducts. “The Nelson-Eames-Girard experiment was certainly precocious,” Abercrombie writes, “coming well in advance of the surfeit of visual images now bombarding us from MTV and other sources, but it was based on an optimistic view that such bombardment, carefully planned, would convey a large amount of information. It is by no means clear that such optimism was justified” (148).

Before Art X, Nelson was influential in launching the career of Charles Eames. In the mid-1940s, as director of design and éminence grise of the Herman Miller Furniture Company, Nelson convinced the firm to put into widespread production the molded plywood furniture designed by Eames, who was then virtually unknown, while Nelson, Eames, and Eames's wife, Ray, revolutionized corporate graphics and showroom design with Herman Miller's logo, display windows, brochure layouts, and other promotional materials. For a remodeling of Herman Miller's Chicago showroom in 1948, Nelson's firm designed what seems to be the first example of track lighting.

Exhibitions, with their requisite synergy of form and content, proved to be Nelson's best medium for communication. Writing in anticipation of the New York World's Fair of 1939, Nelson stressed that exhibitions must be more than static parades of mechanical wonders—their stock-in-trade since London's Exposition of 1851—and must address instead an era's social objectives, what Nelson called “the live issues of the day” (152).

Two decades later, in 1959, the American National Exhibition in Moscow, the first cultural exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union since the Bolshevik Revolution, offered Nelson the chance to put his ideas into practice. Working for the United States Information Agency, Nelson masterminded in less than nine months an entire exhibition about American life that sprawled across eight acres in Moscow's Sokolniki Park. In only six weeks, three million Russians wandered through a dazzling array of displays. In marked contrast to virtually all previous

events, visitors to the first hall—Buckminster Fuller's gold anodized-aluminum geodesic dome—witnessed no objects. Suspended from the dome's ceiling were seven 20-by-30-foot screens on which Charles and Ray Eames's “Glimpses of the USA,” a day-in-the-life-of-America compilation of 2,200 still and moving images, was projected. Multiple images of serpentine freeway overpasses, people having breakfast, and Marilyn Monroe flirting in the film *Some Like It Hot* conveyed the breadth of America in a way that today seems painfully innocent. Nelson and Eames hoped that the multimedia presentation would prove to the Russians that such things as cars and movies were not pleasures restricted to an American elite but were available to a democratic all. Under the screens was an IBM “information machine” that answered thousands of questions about American life, while outside the dome visitors toured Nelson-designed pavilions of consumer goods and furniture, a reinstallation of the Museum of Modern Art's landmark exhibition *The Family of Man*, and a presentation of Walt Disney's 360-degree film about America, *Circarama*.

While the Russian visitors were delighted, the Soviet press was aghast. “As Nelson proposed in 1936,” Abercrombie writes, “the exhibition had not shown the machine, but its social implications” (176). In New York, where a Russian counterpart exhibition was on view, the machinery of the first industrial age was a heavy presence. Given the withering of America's industrial base, perhaps the Russians were right to criticize.

The Moscow exhibition celebrated the results of mass production, just as Nelson had throughout his career as an architect. As a magazine editor and critic in the 1930s, he promoted international Modernism to an isolationist and tradition-bound America, championing Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Richard Neutra, Eero Saarinen, and Gio Ponti in the pages of *Pencil Points* and *The Architectural Forum*. Although he designed with William Hamby the avant-garde Fairchild House in New York City in 1941—a kind of American version of Pierre Chareau's Parisian Maison de Verre—Nelson in his career emphasized the development of modular building systems over the conventional self-contained building. His never-realized Experimental House of

1957, for example, would have allowed its owners to create their own domestic environments by combining any number and arrangement of prefabricated plastic-domed pavilions. His systems of metal tubes and poles, “aluminum lumber,” Nelson dubbed them (123), could be assembled by anyone as lightweight armatures for home storage units, shelves, and kitchen appliances. In reality, as Abercrombie points out, these systems required skilled workmen, and they were never structurally foolproof.

Still, the dream of an everyman form of building persisted. The 1964 Action Office, developed for Herman Miller, transformed the workplace with its flexible units for working, sitting, and tacking things up. Promoting the new system, Nelson gave an interview to the *New York Herald Tribune*. His comments about Action Office, as could be said of his entire career, prophesied a shift in design's center of gravity from hardware to software. “These are not desks and filing cabinets,” Nelson proclaimed. “This is a way of life” (213).

— Donald Albrecht
New York City

Kenneth E. Foote et al., editors

RE-READING CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1994, viii + 494 pp., 85 b&w photos, 3 line drawings, 23 maps, 15 diagrams. \$55.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-292-72483-7. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 0-292-72484-5.

At the beginning of *Re-reading Cultural Geography* one of its contributors recalls, from a suitably distant vantage point (“a small German town”), writing his contribution to the predecessor volume thirty years ago in “a hut in a Mexican village.” To specify these locations is to invoke the historic tropes of cultural geography's sister discipline, cultural anthropology: the romance of fieldwork in exotic locales, the sweatstained clothes and the tattered field notes. For geographers of earlier generations, “‘culture’ was a shorthand for those foreign people in whose lands geographers muddled their boots” (Marie Price and Martin Lewis, “The Reinvention of Cultural Geography,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 83 [1993]: 1–17). Cultural

geography began with the mission of explaining the landscapes of exotic others.

What follows, however, amply demonstrates that this mission has changed. Like cultural anthropology, cultural geography has seen its assumptions challenged and its paradigms enriched over the period that separates this volume from its predecessor, *Readings in Cultural Geography*, first published in 1962. The book registers this sense of disciplinary change, both explicitly and implicitly. The two editors of the earlier volume were asked to contribute, and the eighteen topical chapters range in date from the 1950s to the present. A great deal of text has been devoted to the development of the field, through no less than thirteen theoretical and programmatic essays which introduce and summarize the chapters, proposing interpretations and pedagogical strategies, marking out the territory of cultural geography.

Nevertheless, the editors of *Re-reading Cultural Geography* intend it simply as a "collection of resources" for the teaching of cultural geography, wishing to sidestep the difficult task of a survey text. They have chosen to group the substantive chapters to emphasize three major themes in relation to landscape and human culture: "How the world looks," "How the world works," and "What the world means." Of central interest to the reader, then, is the conceptualization of this "world."

For many of the authors of topical chapters, the world under discussion is that of material objects in the Anglo-American cultural landscape: herein lies the book's obvious attraction for architectural historians, especially Americanists. Geographers can offer a uniquely evenhanded perspective on designed landscapes of all sorts, and have developed sophisticated tools for understanding the physical context of human culture. These assets aside, however, some cultural geographers would consider such a conceptual world too narrow.

In his lucid and provocative afterword, Marvin W. Mikesell, one of the editors of the earlier volume, takes issue with the idea that cultural geographers should study landscapes to the exclusion of other spatial phenomena: "Landscape in all its various and ambiguous meanings is a very big word, but it is not big enough to be a synonym for cultural geography" (439). He also regrets the book's bias toward English-

language and North American studies: "Unless cultural geography is redefined as a study of our culture rather than of cultures, I do not see how the communications problems created by Anglo-American linguistic chauvinism can be denied" (442).

Architecture figures prominently among the topics considered. After "landscape," the index entry for "architecture" is the longest in the book. Of the eighteen empirical chapters, eight are principally concerned with architecture and urbanism, and many of the rest address them in some way. For instance, Barbara Rubin Hudson's important "Aesthetic Ideology and Urban Design," originally published in 1979, is an analysis of commercialism and the White City aesthetic that has become known to many students of American Beaux-Arts architecture and urbanism. Following similar reasoning is Mona Domosh's study, "The Symbolism of the Skyscraper," first published in the *Journal of Urban History* in 1988. Daniel D. Arreola provides an efficient summary of the development of San Antonio in arguing for its status as "the Mexican American cultural capital." And Robert Riley's "Speculations on the New American Landscapes" is a thoughtful essay on consumer landscapes as of 1980, revised for inclusion here.

The volume revisits a number of classics that will be familiar to Americanists. J. B. Jackson's elegant "The Westward-moving House," first published in 1953, looks at the changes in American houses and farms over the three-hundred-year period of settlement. The article is powerfully written, and compares well with the more recent and more overtly scholarly pieces in the volume. Another classic is Donald W. Meinig's important analysis of the western United States, "American Wests: Preface to a Geographical Explanation."

Geographers who study the built environment have occasionally been accused of unwarranted faith in the "truth" of vernacular building. For instance, Peirce Lewis, in "Common Houses, Cultural Spoor," claims that "primary data do not necessarily come from published documents, but from the world itself" (107). In the current climate of epistemological questioning, it may be hard to accept any such hierarchy of primariness, or to imagine having access to "the world itself." But Lewis's article, originally published in 1972, remains required read-

ing for students of vernacular architecture. Lewis, following in the tradition of Louisiana geographer Fred Kniffen, makes good use of material artifacts, and in particular houses, as sources of information about cultural practices and processes.

Terry Jordan's "Cultural Preadaptation and the American Forest Frontier: The Role of New Sweden," which analyzes elements of the material culture of early Scandinavian immigrants, finds in them adaptive strategies that led to successful westward expansion of the frontier. The article adopts an ecological perspective to suggest not only how but why a relatively small cadre of Finnish woodsmen could have had such a decisive influence on the pioneer landscape, furnishing types and prototypes for shelters, fences, and agricultural practices that facilitated the settlement of the forested frontier. Taking a similar but more radical line of argument, Alfred W. Crosby proposes to view European settlement as an instance of biological competition. In "Ecological Imperialism: The Overseas Migration of Western Europeans as a Biological Phenomenon," Crosby poses the question of why so many European plants, diseases, animals, and humans were able to compete successfully with native life in the Americas, while the theoretically possible invasion of American species in the other direction was extremely limited and easily controlled. The importance of these ideas for historians of American architecture is clear.

Several of the articles in the book shade into cultural history and the Anglo-American school of cultural studies. In this vein, Patrick McGreevy's "Imagining the Future at Niagara Falls" will prove useful to anyone working on links between development, the natural landscape and utopian thought. McGreevy makes a convincing case that the scale and initial isolation of Niagara Falls were, paradoxically, the very factors that encouraged turn-of-the-century entrepreneurs to envision development on a correspondingly enormous scale. Less focused, but rich in examples, is "Place and the Novelist," Douglas C. D. Pocock's study of literary places and their role in the novel form.

By virtue of their commitment to understanding the whole way of life of a people in its environment, some cultural geographers give more attention to economic life

than architectural historians are accustomed to do. Notable in this regard, again principally for Americanists, is Carville Earle's "A Staple Interpretation of Slavery and Free Labor," which defends the thesis that the system of slavery was maintained in antebellum Anglo-America for reasons of economic rationalism rather than ideology. Articles by Bernard Nietschmann and Karl S. Zimmerer address issues of agricultural change in contemporary subsistence and smallholder economies, and may prove of theoretical interest for architectural historians of early modern Europe, as well as those who work on contemporary developing countries.

The theoretical essays are not uniformly useful to the architectural historian. Several are primarily concerned with programmatic and curricular debates within geography, and are therefore addressed to stakeholders in the field. However, others are well worth reading for anyone interested in current theoretical issues. "Diffusionism: A Uniformitarian Critique," by James M. Blaut, is a closely-reasoned investigation into questions of innovation and diffusion

of cultural traits, and could easily be seen to apply to architectural styles, building methods, and other subjects of direct concern to architecture. And Donald Cosgrove, in "Worlds of Meaning: Cultural Geography and the Imagination," provides a short but intelligent discussion of theoretical problems in attributing meaning to physical environments.

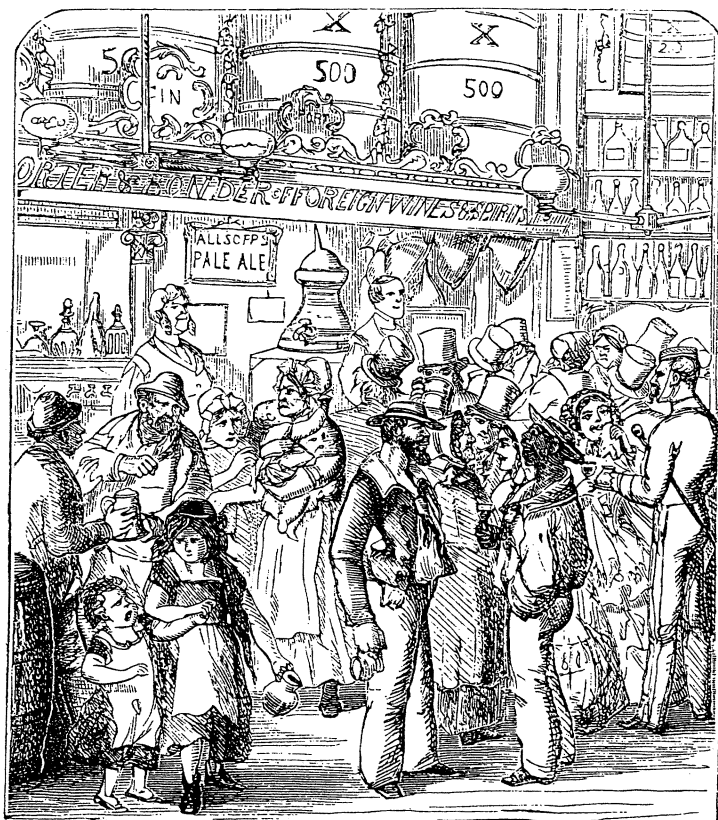
Readers interested in the genealogy of, and debates surrounding, the so-called Berkeley school of cultural geography, associated with the late Carl O. Sauer, will find a great deal of material. There has been much recent discussion regarding the status and continuing validity of the principles of "traditional" cultural geography (mentioned in the opening paragraph of this review). By and large, this debate has boiled down to the criticism of Sauerian geography by younger Anglo-American scholars as being concerned with *pattern* as opposed to *process*, and therefore denying notions of dynamism and individual agency that should be integral to the study of cultural landscapes. Though the aims of the volume are clearly synthetic, tensions are nonethe-

less manifest. In particular, James S. Duncan's "After the Civil War: Reconstructing Cultural Geography as Heterotopia" recounts this debate from the point of view of one of the critics, arguing against the possibility or desirability of any sort of synthetic, unifying paradigm for the field.

Re-reading Cultural Geography will be welcomed by architectural historians who are already interested in cultural geography and who may have used some of its ideas or information in the past. The volume is a rich mixture of familiar and unfamiliar topics and ideas. It may, however, be difficult to use as an introduction to the field, since many articles assume familiarity with a rather amorphous body of terms and disciplinary debates.

One of the most useful features is the annotated reference list that follows each empirical chapter, together with the bibliography at the end of the volume. These alone may be worth the purchase price; despite inevitable lacunae, they give access to a literature of unique value.

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