



Book Review: Architecture and nature: creating the American landscape

Jon Goss

► To cite this version:

Jon Goss. Book Review: Architecture and nature: creating the American landscape. cultural geographies, 2005, 12 (3), pp.380-382. 10.1177/147447400501200308 . hal-00571988

HAL Id: hal-00571988

<https://hal.science/hal-00571988>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

logic and, on the other, that this logic has become obsolete for the understanding and organization of the world in present times. The map is defined by the author as 'a formidable ontological device, a silent tool for the implicit – and therefore unreflexive – definition of the nature of things in the world' (p. 85). Farinelli leads us through the labyrinthine origins of this device, from Homer to Hippodamos and Alberti. A device through which the world is 'curarized': movement is frozen into solid matter, process into form, people into things. Geography as a discipline has been, Farinelli argues, of critical importance in this 'mappification' of our ways of thinking, and consequently for the transformation of the material world.

The thesis itself will not surprise readers of *Geografia* familiar with work in the history of geography and cartography of the past two decades. What is dazzling, however, is how the author moves smoothly, in the spaces defined by his rigid cartographic grid, from Hobbes to Hippodamos, from Humboldt to Alberti, from Dolly to Mike Davis or from the Italian soccer star Alessandro Totti to ... Anaximander, creating unexpected and illuminating relations.

Too enthusiastic this review? Okay, let's come with a critique then. Franco Farinelli remains very much the heir of German phenomenology. This is manifest in his (Heideggerian) passion for origins and etymology as well as in his critique of modernity as a disenchantment of the world. I sometimes wonder, however, in the company of a few others, whether we have ever really been modern, if the world was ever really disenchanted and, therefore, if the critique of modernity should not be replaced (or at least complemented) by the careful analysis of the heterogeneous associations that we day by day fabricate with pieces of beings and technology, nature and culture, symbols and stones, maps and subversions of the maps. Because of this 'German idealist' positioning *Geografia* does not completely live up to one of its proclaimed ambitions: 'to be a first step towards the only possible global geography: that of senses, viewpoints and models of the world' (p. 37). Farinelli's book is more often a brilliant critique than a proposal.

This being said, for anyone only remotely interested in the discourse of geography, reading *Geografia* is a constant jubilation.

University of Neuchâtel

OLA SÖDERSTRÖM

Architecture and nature: creating the American landscape. By Christine Macy and Sarah Bonnemaïson. London and New York: Routledge. 2003. 372 pp. £65.00 cloth; £27.50 paper. ISBN 0 415 28358 2 cloth; 0 415 28359 0 paper.

This book explores four moments in the changing architectural expression of the relationship between nation and nature in the United States: the closing of the frontier at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginnings of conservation; the economic depression of the 1930s and ideals of a return to nature; the atomic age in the aftermath of the Second World War associated with hubris and paranoia; and ecopolitics in the 1970s and movements for alternative living. For each moment the authors focus on

particular buildings that express ideas about nature, although discussion ranges widely over architecture, landscape and urban design, biography, and technological and social context.

Following a brief introduction justifying the choice of buildings and the historical approach, the first substantive chapter examines the images of wilderness at the Columbia Exhibition, focusing on the 'Boone and Crocket Club House'. This hunter's lodge is interpreted as both 'a lesson in natural law' and a statement of 'essential American national character [of] individualism, courage and self-reliance'. For a book on architecture, however, there is surprisingly little about the cabin itself; most of the chapter is about the hunters and naturalists who sponsored it, the ideal of the primitive hut, the 'hunting man' as a natural aristocrat and the relationship between the 'fair chase' and 'free trade'. This pattern is repeated in subsequent chapters, such that buildings under discussion sometimes get lost in the details. The little hut thus becomes a metaphor for the architectural content of the book when the authors describe it as 'striking in its ability to say so much with so little'. The tone is also conspiratorial: in the first chapter, for example, conservation is reduced to a means to wage war on working class; ethnographic representation is a means to 'isolate' and expel Native Americans from the natural landscape; and sculptures of wild animals express a unique and threatening 'American animalism'.

The second chapter focuses on another log cabin: Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone National Park. Although much grander, it similarly offers 'a moral lesson', in this case on the appropriate conduct of nature tourism. The authors discuss discourses of tourism and nature, and national parks, photography, highways, anthropology of Native America and the emergence of a 'national landscape of leisure'. Like the Hunter's Lodge, the Inn provides a masculine retreat from the enervations of feminine civilization, but it also reflects the 'bisexual design' of the Arts and Crafts period: 'the rusticated masonry, solid volumes and deep relief [are] reassuringly masculine', but the log cabin has been 'dramatically feminized', as evidenced in interior timbers that are 'slender . . . kinked and curvy' and in bedroom details such as cotton lace curtains.

The third chapter focuses on 'great works' of the Tennessee Valley Authority, which articulate a vision of conservation based on integration of humans and modern technology with nature through regional planning. The authors consider the ideal 'American folk', new towns, the craft movement in Appalachia, freeways and progress, and, again, conservation and tourism. Exposing gender contradictions of the progressive agenda, Norris Dam is read in terms of the 'technological sublime', as a monument to American modernism whose mass and power is testament to national masculinity – even more than the skyscraper, in fact, since the latter, although 'thrusting towards fantastic heights still carries voids within its towers. The dams, free of such anxiety, are the perfect expression of a solid and therefore masculine architecture.' Citing eroticization in historic reports, the authors claim. 'Once the TVA has plugged up the river and restrained it, no longer does the wasted seed of the frontier spirit flow downstream. If the self-serving ethic of frontier capitalism is associated with wasted seed flowing downstream, a biblical sin in this Bible belt region, the collective spirit of New Deal cooperation was to fertilize and renew the American garden.'

The fourth chapter examines Case Study Houses of Los Angeles, part of a postwar competition for housing design. The transparency and openness of the emerging 'California Look' are taken as expressions of democracy, even as nature and the public realm are privately appropriated in the form of enclosed or interior gardens. Contradictions within domestic architecture are linked to 'atomic anxiety', allowing play on multiple meanings of containment, and the authors explore aesthetics of nuclear explosions, McCarthyism, and symbolism of Superman. Living in fragile glass houses becomes an act of denial since '[t]o be behind glass is to be paralyzed – one can see everything and do nothing. Through glass, the final flash will be visible. Darkened, it becomes the sunglasses worn by spectators of the bomb. Translucent... it turns bodies into ghosts, much as the atomic flash turns shadows into solids.'

The final chapter considers geodesic domes and ecological consciousness of the 1970s, arguing that Buckminster Fuller's architecture expresses emerging consciousness of the global dimensions of nature. The authors are more sympathetic to the progressive vision of green architecture, though they poke fun at the 'earnest morality' and 'religious sensibility' of the 'Integral Urban House' developed in Berkeley in the 1970s. Strangely, there is no consideration of gendering of this architecture or alternative lifestyles. Instead, the authors argue that in rejecting separation of humans from nature, counter-cultural activists close the circle: like hunters in the Boone and Crockett Club and architects of national parks, they desire communion with nature, though in this case more inclusive and democratic, particularly in their respect of Native American culture; and like TVA and architects of the Case Study Houses, they seek to integrate humans and nature through technology, though more appropriate and under collective rather than public or private initiative.

Unfortunately there is no concluding chapter, and it is hard to identify common themes within selected case studies that might allow us to identify something called '*the* American landscape', or even to understand architecture as symptomatic of a particular 'American' relationship between nation and nature. Although the authors claim to take an historical approach, they read buildings from a critical present, neither sympathetically locating architects in their context nor considering how contemporary users experienced the buildings. The book relentlessly exposes ideologies of progress, but there is not much in it that might help us realize the goal with which it ends: 'if people are to learn to live in harmony with nature, that has to do not only with how buildings are designed, but how we live in them.'

University of Hawai'i

JON GOSS