

**Groth, Paul, and Todd W. Bressi, eds. *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997. Pp. ix, 272. Maps, black and white illustrations, bibliography and index**

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the illustrations, and while captions are used to identify people, they do not point out what is significant in the visual image, or how it relates to the text of the chapter. Apart from brief references to bank barns and Mennonite Georgian-style houses, there is no architectural assessment of buildings and no floor plans of buildings are presented. The fifty beautifully prepared black-and-white maps in the book are an antidote for the few surviving township maps. It seems a pity that none of the clearer maps from the past such as the Tremain map of 1861 were reproduced in their original form. The digitized translation of the 1861 map inside the front cover lacks the names of land-owners. On it modern symbols for churches, schools, post offices, hotels and mills are so large as to obscure their exact location, in contrast with the precision of the original map.

How well does Bloomfield succeed in capturing the persisting and valuable essence of Waterloo Township? In many ways she does establish the particularity of this township, citing the German language spoken, its unique land survey, the complexity of its cadastre, its large size, its irregular roads, the lack of road allowances, the lack of Crown and clergy reserves, its group settlement by Pennsylvania Mennonites, and so on to its demise in 1972 which she describes as "one of the most complex in Ontario." Bloomfield says "Waterloo Township is unique." She also claims that this "history illustrates also larger processes of change in southern Ontario during the last two centuries — from the acquisition of land from aboriginal peoples in the late eighteenth century, through the creation of a rural economy and society, to the transforming effects of industrialization and urbanization." Readers may be forgiven if they are confused as to whether Waterloo was a typical or unique township. In a sense it almost doesn't matter. In the midst of the present urban sprawl, hampered by the destruction of so many original township records, Bloomfield was obliged in part to re-create the reality of rural Waterloo township from provincial legislation and regulations. What partly emerges as her subject is not Waterloo Township specifically, but rather a more generalized biography of the township in Ontario, that is, *any* Ontario township.

There is surprisingly little drama for a book that opens with "Setting the Stage" and closes with "Last Act." Almost no coverage is given to the generic German identity of much of the population, other than listing family names, dates and paths of arrival. Bloomfield would have us believe that little evidence has been found of the effect of two world wars on the local German-speaking population, but a dozen or so references sprinkled through the text and notes effectively suggest otherwise. Had the "German" character of local society been more fully delineated, Bloomfield might better have succeeded in capturing the persisting and valuable essence of Waterloo Township.

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Groth, Paul, and Todd W. Bressi, eds. *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997. Pp. ix, 272. Maps, black and white illustrations, bibliography and index.

This volume is the product of a 1990 symposium held to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Berkeley Department of Landscape Architecture. It was intended to be an interdisciplinary forum on subjects, methods, and philosophies of that ever-expanding term, landscape studies. In an attempt at focussing the predictable eclecticism that threatens such an approach, contributors were urged to focus on two principal issues: the reliability of visual and spatial information in understanding past and present cultures; and the ways in which the social and cultural pluralism of landscapes are best understood.

The volume is organized in three parts. First, the editors present an efficient "capsule history" of the traditions and practice of landscape study. Secondly, ten practitioners demonstrate their specific approaches to interpreting landscapes. Finally, six chapters are devoted to scholarly critiques of the earlier contributions and reflect on the future of landscape studies. The essays range from comprehensive surveys and critiques, through empirical case-studies, to detailed expositions of preferred methodology.

Several of the contributors set up the straw-men of the limitations of superficial analysis of a culture's external features, or else tilt at the windmill of a Sauerian fetish concerned solely with material "stuff." And all too often, the mantra is the same: *certainly*, visual analysis does yield important insights; *however*, reliance on visual analysis alone is dangerous; *therefore*, visual evidence must be accompanied by the scrutiny of other historical documentation; *finally*, it is only through these that social processes underlying material things may be exposed. Thus, Deryck Holdsworth's thorough investigation of landscape and archives as texts pays obeisance to all the stations of the theoretical-cross along his Via Delarosa that laments the shortfalls of naive vision and the neglect of "broader issues of social, cultural, and economic change" (p. 54).

But there are others. Rina Swentzell's essay on conflicting landscape values in the Santa Clara Pueblo breathes life into the power of the visual engagement with place. She demonstrates how the materiality of this particular setting is imbued with the people's relationship with the land, their community, and the cosmos. It was/is/will be a world where everything is "touchable, knowable, and accessible" (p. 57). In this way, Swentzell applies the power of the visual to contrast the holistic, natural world of the pueblo with the alien imposition of the Bureau of Indian Affairs school. Dolores Hayden also addresses "sense of place," but from a more explicitly theoretical perspective in which urban landscape history is informed by the "politics of space." For her, a sensitive history of urban landscapes must combine an appreciation of the aesthetics and politics of distinctive spaces and the part they play in economic and social reproduction. Hayden's visuals accompany a lucid argument

for the understanding of “place-bound identities” and the demonstration of how “people’s attachments to places are material, social, and imaginative” (133). However, it must be said that they are presented more as auxiliary illustrations rather than as evidence to be integrated into her thesis. Indeed, considering this volume’s concern with a critical evaluation of the *utility* of the image, little attention is paid to the *theory* of the visual. Where is the discussion of the power of iconography, the insights of semiotics, the rigour of visual theory? Only a few of the contributions attempt a detailed exposition of the potential contribution of a rigorous visual analysis.

At least Denis Cosgrove does not dodge the column in his use of Renaissance spectacle and theatre to elucidate the tension between “visual and textual truth in contemporary landscape criticism” (p. 100). He takes head-on the Western world’s distrust of images and preference for text and mathematical symbol and argues that visual images should be taken seriously as “one among the many discursive fields in which we may represent truth” to be placed “into a dialectic unity with text” (p. 110). In a similar vein, Catherine Howett’s critique of “certain ways of viewing the world” (p. 85) unpacks the ways by which Western society has codified the way it “sees” the world by focussing on prevailing aesthetic and scientific discourses. In a well-documented and well-argued study, she demonstrates how our aesthetic criteria for evaluating landscapes can only be understood in the context of an ever-evolving cultural tradition.

Such perspectives on how the material world is visualized provoked those charged with the task of commenting on the future direction of landscape studies. They include some of the most productive scholars in the field: Wilbur Zelinsky, David Lowenthal, Dell Upton, Jay Appleton, Robert Riley. All of them provide good service in imaginative critiques of the past and didactic prospects for the future.

But it is Richard Walker who grasps the nettle of the essential tension running through much of this volume: the imputed conflict between the materialist approach to landscape and the enthusiasms of the new cultural geographers informed by social theory. In an excitingly critical and playful think-piece, Walker chides all around: the traditional landscape school for a static and anti-modernist view of culture; new cultural geographers for their cultural idealism; and political economists for their neglect of consumer cultures (p. 172). While his unabashed materialist position will irritate some, others will sympathize with his discontent with,

the posturing of the postmodernist and the mannered style of discourse that glibly condemns the linear, logical, and evidentiary essay in favor of fragments of literary allusion and freely tossed Lacanian word salads, which leave a faint and convoluted trail of simulacrum for the poor reader to follow (p. 173).

His critical whimsy disposed of, Walker goes on to advocate the “promiscuous mingling and mutual education of cultural geographers and political economists” (p. 173).

As noted by Dell Upton, “the primacy of vision in landscape studies” is the central theme running through these various studies (174). Indeed, the title of the original 1990 symposium — *Vision, Culture, and Landscape* — would have been a fine identifier for this volume as it represents a provocative investigation of these three inseparable phenomena.

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Olechnowicz, Andrzej. *Working-Class Housing in England between the Wars: The Becontree Estate*. Oxford Historical Manuscripts. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. Pp. 273. 2 maps, 17 tables, bibliography, index. \$121.50 (cloth).

When urban studies came storming onto the scholarly scene in the 1960s, housing was identified as one of the essential areas of research. Scholars as diverse as American historian Sam Bass Warner and the French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre considered housing a key site of scholarly investigation which directly intersected with the wider areas of political economy, social relations and culture. In the last thirty years, researchers have broadened this agenda by asking new questions and applying new methods of inquiry. Domestic economy and architecture, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, and a host of other themes have been investigated in the realm of both private and public housing. A spate of monographs on various aspects of the housing experience have been published, a specialized journal devoted to housing studies was inaugurated in the 1980s, and prominent journals in economics, geography, history and sociology regularly feature articles on housing.

Yet these developments have been uneven. In the field of public housing history much work needs to be done. Unlike labour and women’s history, broad-ranging “community” studies from an historical perspective that integrate policy analysis and the social history of tenants appear few and far between. That is why Andrzej Olechnowicz’s book on the Becontree estate is so welcome. As governments around the world shed public housing in the name of fiscal restraint and ideological zeal, this book comes at a propitious time. It seeks to understand why council housing has gained a reputation in Britain as one of the “basic social failures of the twentieth century.”

The Becontree public housing estate in the eastern environs of London was the largest supplier of public housing in the world. Comprising four square miles, it contained 25,039 separate dwellings and housed 112,570 persons. Its sheer size has ensured that it has become a focal point for the stormy debates in the twentieth century on the role of state-provided housing.

Olechnowicz concisely sketches in the background to Becontree’s development: the lack of affordable accommodation for Britain’s working class, the debates between different jurisdictions for funding and control of council estates, the pre-