

AMERICANS AND HYBRID LANDSCAPES

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The United States is a hybrid landscape. A hybrid landscape is a space where humans and nature interact. Despite nature encompassing Americans, for the greater part of United States history and even still today, people have been perceived as separate from nature. Natural landscapes in general, are often seen as a space where humans are not present. Therefore, in a hybrid landscape, nature is still prevalent and sometimes unaltered, but humans also inhabit that space and have altered the land to fit their needs. Humans, and more specifically, Americans, have developed the earth around them because they saw the instrumental value in the different parts of the earth. There are two different types of value types: instrumental value and intrinsic value. Organisms and objects have an instrumental value when they have a function, and organisms have an intrinsic value because they inherently possess a value. Throughout American history hybrid landscapes have always been based off the idea of the earth having an instrumental value. Even in the earliest stages in American history, “kitchen gardens greatly outnumbered pure pleasure gardens”, because they were “‘functional’ gardens.”¹ The colonial gardens were not created for the sole purpose of having a garden or having an aesthetically pleasing feature, instead they were created to be serve as a tool for everyday life; a place to prepare and cook meals. Furthermore, in the United States, there have been two different types of hybrid landscapes: unobtrusive hybrid landscapes and stark hybrid landscapes. The major difference between the two different types of hybrid landscapes is the presence of a distinct boundary between the natural landscape and human development. As a result of Americans’ values and development, hybrid landscapes have changed from unobtrusive hybrid landscapes to stark hybrid landscapes, especially in the decades of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

An unobtrusive hybrid landscape is a space where humans and nature interact in such a way that human development and untouched nature are blended and where landscapes are “neither conquered nor preserved.”² For example, the Salton Sea in California, although an environmental disaster today, once was an unobtrusive hybrid landscape. Despite its accidental beginnings, as it was supposed to be a network of irrigation canals, it became “an artificial sea, which, however, mimicked other prehistoric inland seas that had existed in the area.”³ The Salton Sea was an unobtrusive hybrid landscape because it was a manmade sea that behaved as a natural sea. However, a better example of an unobtrusive hybrid landscape is an irrigation canal.

Irrigation canals have been built to function like rivers, and consequently tend to act as natural rivers too. As Mark Fiege explains in *Irrigated Eden*, Americans who settled in Idaho in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries built systems of irrigation canals in order to live further away from rivers and expand their crop fields. To be certain that the irrigation systems would be successful, the residents of Idaho based the canals off of “landforms, water, and gravity,” and “the artificial waterways had to follow the earth’s contours, its curves and elevations.”⁴ Essentially, the canals that Idahoans built mimicked natural rivers since they followed the already naturally occurring topographical features in the surrounding areas. The finished canals showed that human development and nature could exist harmoniously and that “hydraulic technology with land and water was almost an equal human-nature partnership.”⁵ Canals in Idaho were so successful as unobtrusive hybrid landscapes that the small mammals inhabiting the area around the canals “recognized no distinctions between creeks, rivers, sloughs, and irrigation systems.”⁶ Unwanted aquatic vegetation also flourished in these manmade environments. The inability for the organisms in the ecosystem to distinguish between the manmade canals from natural rivers represented a loss in the canals’ instrumental value and a

loss in human control over nature, because the canals no longer upheld the idea that nature existed solely for “man’s benefit.”⁷ The farmers in Idaho had a problem with this loss of control over nature because Americans have had this deeply embedded idea that nature needs to be controlled in order for the relationship between humans and nature to be successful.

The deeply embedded idea that humans should control nature was instilled very in early Americans’ lives. For example, in primary school, American “school gardens reveal how deeply metaphors of nature were embedded in thinking.”⁸ American children were taught that living nature was “part of organic development that simply occurs” but also that “nature could also be wild, unregulated, even dangerous,” and this is why “human intervention in the natural world, as well as the world of child development, was essential, whether to protect some basic nature, to enhance it, or to control it.”⁹

A key example of Americans’ attempt to control nature and create a stark hybrid landscape is the use of levees in the Mississippi delta region. A stark hybrid landscape is a space where humans and nature interact in such a way where the lines between human development and untouched nature are clearly defined by a boundary. Whether the boundary is political, social, or physical, a definite line between nature and human development creates a stark hybrid landscape. In *The Big Muddy*, Christopher Morris describes how Americans and previous settlers of the lower Mississippi installed dikes and levees to try to control the flooding from the river and its meandering nature. By installing levees, settlers of the Mississippi “reconfigured the human relationship with the environment, by separating land and water so as to enhance human control over both,”¹⁰ as well as create a defined boundary between nature and human development. The settlers of the Mississippi wanted to maximize the functionality of the land around them for farming, so an unobtrusive hybrid landscape would not have suited for them, since in order to

farm the crops they wanted to, the land would have to have been much drier than it would be naturally. This perceived need for control over nature resulted in an attempt at creating a stark hybrid landscape that was ultimately unsuccessful.

An example of a successful stark hybrid landscape is the installation of park space within an urban landscape. Urban planners in the early twentieth century incorporated parks into city plans because they “were to provide an antidote to the overpopulated, congested built-up city centres with unhealthy living conditions. The parks were to improve the citizens’ physical and moral wellbeing, increase land prices in certain areas and act as a means for municipal and national representation.”¹¹ However, parks were also a method of human control over nature, because people could place nature within set boundaries to differentiate between wilderness and human development. On a larger scale, in the late nineteenth century, due to the 1891 Forest Reserve Act, the United States began setting aside land as national parks. Yellowstone National Park was the first American national park and was established in 1872. National parks are stark hybrid landscapes because the parks themselves have defined borders and function as a place where resources are either conserved or preserved.

An example of national parks existing as stark hybrid landscapes is in *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation* by Karl Jacoby. Jacoby explains how although the land within the national parks was supposed to be set aside and protected from human development, the park had some instrumental value because people living around the national parks were supposed to have access to its natural resources, such as wood and wild game. Allowing the public to access these lands shows that the idea of conservation had an “emphasis on using the power of science and the state to rationally manage resources.”¹² Therefore, despite the division between humans and nature, the two were still

interacting with one another in a hybrid landscape. Parks also began to serve spiritual functions in that parks “evoked the Romantic search for authentic experience, in which nature was offered as the antidote to an increasingly industrial, ‘overcivilized’ existence.”¹³ However, it was preservationists rather than conservationists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that saw parks as having not only an instrumental value but also an intrinsic value. By giving nature an intrinsic value, preservationists like John Muir sought to prevent the American public from depleting and degrading the nature around them. Nevertheless, preservationists still recognized that parks had instrumental value and for example, could be used as “places of recreation and worship.”¹⁴ Another understanding of stark hybrid landscapes is the idea of preserving “green space,” or “green, civic open spaces” that are mostly comprised of nature without human development.

The idea of preserving green spaces was reintroduced in the 1970s after a “rapid loss of green space due to urban and suburban growth after World War II”¹⁵ Although Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were more focused on what kinds of resources were available on green spaces, in the 1970s, and today Americans have recognized more different types of instrumental values that green spaces hold. Green spaces can function to aid environmental problems, by improving quality of the air and water, reducing the carbon dioxide footprint, lower temperatures in the summer, filter runoff, and absorb runoff.¹⁶ Green spaces also “can serve recreational needs” as well as “aesthetic value.”¹⁷ Furthermore, “parks and other accessible spaces can increase the connectivity of neighborhoods by bringing residents together in discrete places for greater social bonding,”¹⁸ which promotes a healthy society. Lastly, green spaces continue to also have an economic instrumental value, in that not only do they provide resources, but also “boost tourism” and increase an “area's property values.”¹⁹ So, although stark

hybrid landscapes were introduced out of Americans' desire to control land and serve as a place of resources, stark hybrid landscapes have much more instrumental value than earlier Americans realized. Discovering all of the positive effects from stark hybrid landscapes has consequently triggered some Americans to try to take green spaces even further and develop a way of almost returning back to more of an unobtrusive hybrid landscape, and transform their current stark hybrid landscape into a "less stark" hybrid landscape.

An example of a "less stark" hybrid landscapes include green roofs, buildings that are designed to function as if they were a part of nature. Located in Michigan, the Ford Rouge Center's Green Roof, built in 2003, is "a 10-acre green roof atop a 1.1 million square foot truck manufacturing plant lies at the heart of a system of wet meadow gardens, porous paving, hedgerows and bio-swales that attenuates, cleanses, and conveys storm water across the site."²⁰ The green roof has three main instrumental values that span from environmental to economic benefits: 1) Cleaner storm water, since the roof filters rainwater through natural stormwater management. 2) Better insulation, thereby reducing heating and cooling costs by up to 5 percent. 3) A longer roof life.²¹ The green roof is useful to the Ford Motor Company but also allows for a new kind of interaction between human development and nature, one that is more integrated.

Most recently, architects have designed a building to function as if it were a part of nature. Last year, in 2012, NASA unveiled its new Sustainability Base in California that is "designed in harmony with its environment" and strives to be "native to place."²² Although its primary instrumental value is to be a workplace, the building makes the hybrid landscape around it less stark in the way that the building itself functions. The NASA Sustainability Base was made out of mostly regionally available recycled or recyclable materials and was "inspired by

the wind tunnels of NASA Ames Campus and the images of NASA satellites” in that “the exoskeleton approach gives the building increased structural performance during seismic events, provides a framework for daylighting and shading strategies, and creates a column-free interior space that facilitates workplace flexibility.”²³ In addition, “the building site is designed to be net energy positive,” by using renewable energy sources that are not only better for the environment, but are also cost-effective.²⁴ The building not only serves as a place of work and productivity for NASA employees, but also mimics nature through its architectural design. Moreover, the NASA Sustainability Base has less of an impact on the landscape around it than conventional buildings, and therefore, is a less stark hybrid landscape.

The United States will always have hybrid landscapes because hybrid landscapes are the world in which we live with animals and plants, but also because Americans assign nature an instrumental value. Although the coexistence of Americans and nature has differed overtime, Americans and nature have existed together on the basis that the earth has functions that provide for Americans. Whether that relationship between Americans and nature has been through mimicking like in unobtrusive hybrid landscapes or through control and set boundaries as seen with national parks in stark hybrid landscapes, the land is there for Americans to use, but also for nature to inhabit. As for the future, American may try to make hybrid landscapes less stark on the premise that they would have multiple benefits relating not only to people, but also to the environment and the economy. Nevertheless, as long as humans are residing on Earth, the planet will be a hybrid landscape.

Endnotes

¹ Sherene Baugher and Lu Ann De Cunzo, "Archaeological Perspectives On and Contributions To the Study of Colonial American Gardens," *Landscape Journal* 21, no. 1 (March 2002): 72, *Environment Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 14, 2013).

² Richard White, "From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The Cultural Turn in Environmental History," *Historian* 66, no. 3 (Fall2004 2004): 563, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 14, 2013).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 19.

⁵ Fiege, 22.

⁶ Fiege, 49.

⁷ Fiege, 22.

⁸ Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, "'A Better Crop of Boys and Girls': The School Gardening Movement, 1890–1920," *History Of Education Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (March 2008): 61, *Education Research Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 17, 2013).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Christopher Morris, *The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 95.

¹¹ Sonja Duempelmann, "Creating order with nature: transatlantic transfer of ideas in park system planning in twentieth-century Washington D.C., Chicago, Berlin and Rome," *Planning Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (April 2009): 144, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 14, 2013).

¹² Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 16.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ John Muir, "The Hetch Hetchy Valley," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. VI, No. 4 (1908), under "Articles by John Muir," http://www.sierraclub.org/ca/hetchhetchy/hetch_hetchy_muir_scb_1908.html (accessed November 18, 2013).

¹⁵ Janice C. Griffith, "Green Infrastructure: The Imperative of Open Space Preservation," *Urban Lawyer* 42, no. 4 (Fall2010 2010): 259-306, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 14, 2013).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Ford Rouge Center Landscape Master Plan," William McDonough + Partners, http://www.mcdonoughpartners.com/projects/view/ford_rouge_center_landscape_master_plan (accessed November 18, 2013).

²¹ "The Living Roof," The Henry Ford, <http://www.thehenryford.org/rouge/leedlivingroof.aspx> (accessed November 18, 2013).

²² "Sustainability Base: The Next Giant Leap," NASA, <http://www.nasa.gov/externalflash/sustainability-base/> (accessed November 18, 2013).

²³ “NASA Sustainability Base / William McDonough + Partners and AECOM.” ArchDaily. <http://www.archdaily.com/231211/nasa-sustainability-base-william-mcdonough-partners-and-aecom/> (accessed November 18, 2013).

²⁴ Ibid.

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