



## **Carl Ortwin Sauer**

### **The Term Cultural Landscape – In:**

Sauer, C. O. 1925. "The Morphology of Landscape". *University of California Publications in Geography* 2 (2):19-53.

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**Lexicon Terms: Cultural Landscapes and Historic Preservation**

**Section summary:**

Cultural landscapes and historic preservation are each concerned with sites significant to history and cultural identity. Within each field, there is some level of awareness that selective study or preservation of sites creates history and identity, privileging particular narratives or events over others. As a result of this new self-awareness, there is increasing interest in both fields in urban sites, sites associated with everyday life, and sites significant to minority groups.

A major difference between the two groups might be that cultural landscapes generally accepts change as part of the landscape, where preservation has traditionally fought against it, seeking to preserve a site as it appeared at one particular time considered to be significant. (However, this division is not always clear-cut: NPS and the Secretary of Interior describe historic preservation involving landscapes as cultural landscapes.)

**Historic Preservation**

Historic preservation refers to the protection of sites and structures considered historically valuable to a community. This might include the place where a historic event occurred, a work that represents a particular artistic achievement, or something that a group identifies with or holds other symbolic value.

Riesenweber emphasizes that historic preservation is a social construct, an effort to create identity and reinforce power relationships,

“Like other historical endeavors, preservation constructs a story of the past through the lens of the present, and the landscapes with which it is concerned make these stories concrete, seemingly natural, and true. As the narratives historic preservation constructs and materializes

shape our view of the past, it accomplishes social reproduction by legitimizing landscapes that reinforce certain views of the past and elide others. Melnick reminds us so poignantly that these landscapes are central to our personal and collective identities as they create and reinforce self-images and value structures. Historic preservation is thus a powerful process for designing landscapes that, while they form the “taken-for-granted” settings of daily life, silently engage in shaping who we are. This is not only the most convincing argument for preservation but also renders it a serious responsibility. The most important lesson preservationists should take from critical landscape geographers is thus a caution to consider carefully what we preserve, why we preserve it, and for whom it is preserved.” (32)

Traditionally, historic preservation efforts have focused on buildings rather than landscapes. As a result, many standard practices of historic preservation have developed around the goal of maintaining a static, unchanging object. As a result, some have argued that historic preservation is applied incorrectly to landscapes, which are inherently dynamic and changing,

“Those preservationists most closely involved with cultural landscapes recognize the difficulties in applying to the evaluative criteria originally developed primarily for buildings. Others have likewise questioned the possibility and advisability of capturing landscapes and halting change through preservation. J. B. Jackson maintained that part of our appreciation of historic landscapes stems from their very endurance and ongoing change: from the fact that they are a living and integral part of the world. The preservation-sensitive folklorist Bernard Herman has drawn an analogy between preservation and taxidermy, implying that stopping change rakes landscapes and buildings out of the organic world, an act that often means stopping life. Alanen and Melnick echo the voices of critical landscape geographers in characterizing cultural landscapes as both “product and process,” and consider them significant not only as relics representing a particular point or period in time but also for their fluidity, endurance, and subtle presence in the face of ongoing physical and ideological change. Perhaps preservationists would find useful a distinction between historic landscapes, which through their high degree of material integrity particularly evoke some period or event in the past, and cultural landscapes, significant places in which some traces of the past endure yet undergo constant change.” (Riesenweber 29)

In addition to performing “taxidermy”, historic preservation practice (as described in the Guidelines to the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes) has established a features-based approach to landscape preservation that may miss the bigger picture.

Meyer argues that the defining element of many modernist landscapes is not any individual feature, but space. Designers shaped space using features like planted form (labeled “vegetation” in the Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes) or changes in materiality (“furnishings”)—without greater understanding of the designer’s intent, preservation of individual landscape features is meaningless. Further, Meyer argues, landscape architects throughout time have had changing conceptions of ecology that also influenced their designs. Under the Guidelines, however, historic preservation and ecology are considered separate concerns, leading to separate treatment and management plans,

If they are [treated separately] our modern landscapes will be comprised by two separate, and unrelated, management philosophies, one conserving an artifact, or part of it, that is deemed canonical and the other conserving a surrounding, not intersecting ecosystem, oblivious to its reciprocity with, and dependence upon, the human construction within it.” (19)

History:

The Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA), formed in 1853 to protect the former home of George Washington, is considered the first historic preservation organization in the United States. MVLA had lasting effect on the preservation movement – becoming both a model for other preservation organizations and establishing preservation as a private endeavor of the wealthy, focused on prominent figures in early American history.

The first federal legislation addressing historic preservation was the Antiquities Act of 1906 – this allowed the president to establish National Monuments. While intended to protect archaeological sites in from vandalism and looting, the law included no limit on National Monument size, and became a means of establishing national parks where no congressional support for them existed. In 1916, the National Park Service was created, and management of federally-owned historic sites was consolidated.

The 1935 Historic Sites Act required that historic sites be surveyed and researched “to obtain true and accurate historical and archaeological facts and information,” to acquire sites or “Make cooperative agreements with states, municipal subdivisions, corporations, associations, or individuals, with proper bond where deemed advisable, to protect, preserve, maintain or operate any historic or archaeological building, site, object or property”. The Act also required the National Park Service to “Restore, reconstruct, rehabilitate, preserve, and maintain”, as well as operate, prehistoric and historic sites for the benefit of the public and to develop educational programs.

Written in the aftermath of urban renewal and highway projects that had led to the demolition of large tracts of historic inner cities, the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) created the National Register of Historic Places, established a preservation-impact review process for all federal projects, and required that each state create a State Historic Preservation Office, which would be responsible for identifying historic sites and establishing a state-wide preservation plan.

NHPA was primarily focused on the preservation of buildings and districts of buildings. In 1976, the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Historic Preservation Projects with Guidelines for Applying the Standards provided clearer guidelines and standards for historic property acquisition, stabilization and protection, as well as treatment, including preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction: Preservation refers to maintaining a property, acknowledging that its appearance has evolved over time; rehabilitation allows for modifications to accommodate new programming; restoration returns a property to its appearance during a particular “period of significance”; and reconstruction refers to new construction based on historic records.

In 1992, NPS revised the Standards to provide more explicit guidelines for the preservation of landscapes. In the Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes, the landscape is divided into specific elements that should be preserved: topography, vegetation, circulation, water features, structures, buildings, furnishings, and objects.

## **Cultural Landscape**

The field of Cultural Landscape studies has evolved from an interest in the ways humans have shaped and interacted with the landscape, to a more nuanced study of the ways political and

economic forces have shaped human habitation of the land. Essentially, this is a shift from viewing the individual as having agency over the landscape, to the individual's actions being manipulated by the landscape. Sauer established the first practice in the 1920s; postmodernism and the work of Lefebvre and Foucault influenced the latter. Following postmodernism, cultural landscape studies have increasingly emphasized the everyday and landscapes associated with economic or ethnic minority groups.

Although postmodernism has introduced the possibility that cultural landscapes may not be designed by individuals but are instead a response to larger economic and political forces, the assumption still seems to exist that humans construct them with intention. Wild landscapes are distinct from cultural landscapes.

In the broadest sense, cultural landscapes are defined as any area where humans have shaped the landscape, or culture has shaped nature,

“When preservationists think of cultural landscapes, they usually regard them as something resulting from the impact of human activity on a natural environment. In the secretary of the interior's guidelines, for example, a cultural landscape is ‘a geographic area (including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein), associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values.’ The geographer Arnold Alanen and landscape architect Robert Melnick emphasize that these places may be found ‘virtually everywhere that human activities have affected the land.’ Such definitions treat landscape as a material thing and stress the impact of culture on nature, though National Park Service guidelines do so indirectly by alluding to culture through the idea of cultural resources and linking cultural landscape as geographic area with preservation's concept of significance through historical association. Preservation thus presents landscape in a way that cultural geographers associate with Carl Ortwin Sauer, who coined the term *cultural landscape* for his discipline during the 1920s.” (Riesenweber 23)

He [Sauer] defined landscape as “an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural,” while the cultural landscape was something “fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape the result.” (Riesenweber 24)

Carl Sauer and JB Jackson were the earliest authors to address cultural landscapes – influenced by the study of human interaction with the landscape in Europe, upon returning to the United States each advocated the importance of the American cultural landscape. In their definition of the cultural landscape as the natural environment as shaped by human culture, each ultimately advanced the study of the rural landscape over the study of the urban landscape.

“Cultural landscape studies, as the geographer Carl Sauer developed them, focused on the evolution of places and included the ‘combination of natural and man-made elements that comprises, at any given time, the essential character of a place.’ Cultural landscape, as Sauer introduced it, had slightly more specific meanings than place, yet the earliest cultural landscape methods for studying places and people's attachments to them were not adequate to convey fully the political dimensions of places. Unlike social history, which developed an urban bias from the 1960s on, cultural geography, from the 1940s on, leaned to the study of rural, preindustrial landscapes rather than the complicated urban variety, mapping ethnicity

along with vernacular house types or patterns of cultivation, considering ecology but avoiding issues of political contestation.

“As the cultural landscape is more densely inhabited, the economic and social forces that shape it are more complex, change is more rapid, layers proliferate, and abrupt spatial discontinuities often result. Cultural landscape studies often seem unable to address these discontinuities adequately. One can’t simply turn to economic geography or any other kind of quantitative analysis where the human experience of place is often lost. Rather, the cultural geographer’s model of landscape needs to be better anchored in the urban realm, retaining the biological and cultural insights necessary to convey the sense of place while adding more focused analysis of social and economic conflict. This is the project of many politically sensitive geographers today. At the same time, environmental historians such as William Cronon have laid claim to some of this same subject matter, with phrases that sound rather like Sauer: ‘if environmental history is successful in its project, the story of how different peoples have lived and used the natural world will become one of the most basic and fundamental narratives in all of history, without which no understanding of the past could be complete.’ Yet for many environmental historians, the deployment of land and natural resources has been the central preoccupation, without much concern for the aesthetic and social aspects of the built environment, although the two are intertwined.” (Hayden “Urban Landscape History 113)

Sauer and Jackson studied the cultural landscape as a material thing – rather than a construction, or “way of seeing”, as later considered by Cosgrove. Through the work of Cosgrove, the cultural landscape is studied not only as natural material shaped by humans, but as socially constructed and symbolic,

“Whereas Sauer conceived landscape as an array of visible, material forms-especially socially constructed forms-Cosgrove considered landscape ‘not merely the world we see ... [but] a construction, a composition of that world’ that represents the world in much the same way as a landscape painting. While Cosgrove’s analysis does recognize social aspects of landscapes, his analysis further differed from Sauer’s in emphasizing individual action(s) over social ones in the making and remaking of landscapes, something Sauer and his followers had largely ignored.

Cosgrove’s definition of landscape led him to find limitations in the morphological method. Observation alone is insufficient for accessing the deeper meaning of landscapes, he argued, because ‘formal morphology remains unconvincing as an account of landscape to the extent that it ignores ... symbolic dimensions.’ Cosgrove urged geographers’ attention away from landscape’s material forms and toward ‘the symbolic and cultural meaning invested in these forms by those who have produced and sustained them, and that is communicated to those who come into contact with them.’ Accepting ‘the ambiguity and severally layered meanings of landscape does not excuse us from careful examination of them and of their origins,’ he insisted. ‘Rather, it obliges us to pay rather greater attention to them than we have done in the past, for it is in the origins of landscape as a way of seeing the world that we discover its links to broader historical structures and processes and are able to locate landscape study within a progressive debate about society and culture.’” (Riesenweber 26)

Groth and Wilson expand on the idea of the cultural landscape as a structured social construct,

“In the 1980s and 1990s, Marxist and post-Marxist analysis provided a major theoretical realignment in landscape studies and ushered in a greater interest in urban subjects. In the words of the radical geographer Richard Walker, the early cultural landscape concepts of Carl Sauer and J. B. Jackson were ‘altogether too evasive about systematic forces of political economy in mainstream capitalist America and in answering the question of who and what, in fact, create urban and rural environments.’ To distance themselves from the rural and bourgeois overtones of traditional concepts of landscape, many recent writers employ the more neutral terms *space* or *social space*. Building on Marxist political economy, theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey have posited their own conceptions of the social-spatial dialectic. In Harvey’s formulation, ‘space and time are *constituted by* and *constitutive of* social relations and practices.’

“Simultaneously, the meaning and usefulness of the term *culture* have been called into question by Marxist and other writers. James Duncan reminds us that Carl Sauer, like his anthropological contemporaries before World War II, saw culture as independent of, but controlling, individual behavior. Culture was somehow superorganic, responding to laws of its own not related to social action or power. Following from the work of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, a large number of writers who might-with some protest-be grouped together as postmodernists avoid using the term *culture* altogether and focus on ideology, hegemony, the illusions of representation, and the social construction of knowledge. If they do use the term, they emphasize the contingency and individual acting out of culture, the importance of multiple or hybrid cultures, and opposition to cultural norms as central considerations.” (Groth and Wilson 16-17)

Thus, individual agency and political and economic concerns assume a larger role in our study of cultural landscapes,

“During the past twenty years, then, cultural geographers have employed social theoretical insights along with economic, political, and aesthetic considerations to mount a critique of studies that treat cultural landscapes exclusively as things and depend on unmediated observation as method. Rather, they now suggest, landscape is as much image, symbol, signifier, and materialization of ideology or discourse as a material thing. Most importantly, this work has changed landscape “from a noun to a verb,” to borrow a phrase from art historian W. J. T. Mitchell, by pointing out the ways in which landscape participates in the construction of both its own meanings and forms of society. Historic preservation, on the other hand, often utilizes a concept of cultural landscape that originated in the 1920s, made its way into the design professions in the 1960s, and was employed by landscape architects who began to consider landscape preservation in the 1980s. But historic preservation, too, has changed greatly over the past three decades. The emphasis on evaluation within context begun in the 1980s, for instance, signals awareness of some of the theoretical issues with which cultural geographers have grappled.

“Recent geographic scholarship has important insights to offer preservationists as they increasingly grapple with the concept of cultural landscape. Preservation is, on the one hand, a social and political movement and, on the other, a set of institutionalized practices that expressly seek to retain, stabilize, and breathe new life into material remnants of the past.” (Riesenweber 28)

The introduction of concerns for agency, political and economic power into the field allows urban areas to be understood and analyzed as cultural landscapes. Dolores Hayden expounds on the notion that agency has influenced what we understand as culture, landscape, and worthy of preservation,

“Every American city and town contains traces of historic landscapes intertwined with its current spatial configuration. These parts of older landscapes can be preserved and interpreted to strengthen people’s understanding of how a city has developed over time. But often what happens is something else. Cycles of development and redevelopment occur. Care is not taken to preserve the spatial history of ordinary working people and their everyday lives. Instead, funds are often lavished on the preservation of a few architectural monuments along with the celebration of a few men as “city fathers.” In New York City, for example, many buildings designed by the architects McKim, Mead and White at the turn of the century are closely identified with an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male elite who commissioned the private men’s clubs, mansions, banks, and other structures, from which other New Yorkers were often excluded. In contrast, modest urban buildings that represent the social and economic struggles of the majority of ordinary citizens, especially women and members of diverse ethnic communities, have often been overlooked as possible resources for historic preservation. The power of place to nurture social memory-to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory-remains largely untapped for most working people’s neighborhoods in most American cities and for most ethnic history and most women’s history. If we hear little of city mothers, the sense of civic identity which shared women’s history can convey is lost. And even bitter experiences and fights women have lost need to be remembered, so as not to diminish their importance.” (Hayden “Claiming Women’s History” 200)

This quote could easily be describing St. Louis – a working waterfront was removed in order to create a monument to Jefferson and westward expansion.