
An honest observer of the United States today would, I think, find it hard to avoid seeing what is happening to "God's Own Country," or to help asking himself questions about the mess we are making of our landscapes and townscape. Peter Blake indicts those he calls "America's affluent uglifiers" and presents an accurate picture, using every device at his disposal, to make his readers aware of the vicious and systematic "uglification" of America.

The book combines incisive prose with masterful juxtapositions of photographs which support and substantiate his conviction that if the planned deterioration of the American landscape and townscape continues, we will soon have to call this country "God's Own Junkyard." The book is divided into ten chapters, with such titles as "Townscape," "Landscape," "Roadscape," "Carscape," and "Skyscape." There are more than one hundred and fifty photographs.

The mess that is man-made America is a disgrace — "a disgrace," Blake says, "of such vast proportions that only a concerted national effort can now hope to return physical America to the community of civilized nations." In the opening paragraph of his Preface, he tells his readers that his book is not written in anger but "in fury." "It is a deliberate attack upon all those who have already befouled a large portion of this country for private gain and are engaged in befouling the rest." He accuses all Americans without ties to the landscape or townscape in which they live of being "latter-day vandals" — people whose eyes have lost the art of seeing. ("How can a child in Gary, Indiana, say, be taught to use his eyes with discrimination, taste, and intelligence?")

Along with the spectacular growth in population in the nineteenth century, our civilization, especially in the East, was changing rapidly, becoming more an industrial-business civilization and less a rural-agrarian civilization. The Industrial Revolution in a country rich in natural resources produced, suddenly, a vast amount of wealth. A Work ethic — dating back to the Puritans in the seventeenth century — contributed, in the nineteenth century, to making the accumulation of money almost a patriotic duty, a virtue in and of itself. Self-reliance and individualism, the emphasis on the single man, went hand in hand with this growth and expansion, during the century, in the land
of endless opportunity and limitless progress. Optimism and self-reliance became a part of the national consciousness. Previously, Americans had imitated Europe, had imported their art and culture from Europe. Emerson, as a spokesman for what has been called the American Renaissance, encouraged Americans to evolve a culture of their own — distinct, unique, indigenous; at the same time, he fought against conformity and uniformity. Ironically, the emphasis on the single man has, in the twentieth century, led to the decline of a national, characteristically American, culture. If anything is true about our architecture, art, towns, landscape, it is that they have become uniformly ugly. We have shifted away from the individual, creative artist, architect, town planner, craftsman, toward mass vulgarity and the novelty of a garish commercialism. ("The frantic search for novelty, for the sake of novelty, is encouraged by all the pressures that surround us.") Blake insists that the intellectual elite in America has failed to accept its responsibilities or to set an example of self-imposed restraint, of quality rather than novelty, for the rest of the country to follow. He writes:

At present, these should-be leaders are, instead, performing for Mr. Ripley's "Believe It or Not" circus: architects, painters, and sculptors are outdoing one another in acrobatics, in hot pursuit of novelty; taste makers are busy watching the box office and the circulation figures, instead of making taste; and the public (which includes the public uglifiers) simply follows the lead of our supposed "intellectual elite."

Who, today, can say that American taste in general reflects much inspiration or nobility? What is reflected is a widespread shallowness and commercialism. Blake feels, for example, that in destroying our landscape, we are actually destroying the future of civilization in America!

Those who have commented on the disease of ugliness spreading across the country and have tried to diagnose the problem are often accused of jeopardizing free enterprise, the American Way of Life, and the principles of democracy. But let us admit the truth. While we need not become alarmists, we cannot afford to close our eyes and pretend to be blind. Those who care, who voice their concern, who plead for conservation and a historical sense in the face of mutilation and vulgarization, are repeatedly forced to justify beauty as worthwhile: that is, as an enterprise that "pays off." Beauty is suspect. How else explain higher taxes levied on "beautiful" or "prestige" buildings or the destruction of historical buildings and landmarks when they cease to be "money-makers"? How else explain the
acquiescence of so many who now live out their lives in "the massive, monotonous ugliness of most of our Suburbia"?

For the truth is that the mess that is man-made America is merely a caricature of the mess that is art in America — and a very mild caricature at that. The inscription on Sir Christopher Wren's tomb in St. Paul's Cathedral contains the famous words: "If thou seek his monument, look about thee." God forbid that this should ever become our epitaph.

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