

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 38 | Issue 3

Article 4

1968

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Recommended Citation

Riley, Robert. "Villages in a Future Landscape." *New Mexico Quarterly* 38, 3 (1968). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol38/iss3/4>

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Robert Riley

Villages In A Future Landscape

PROMETHEUS WAS AN INTERSTELLAR reconaissance and exploration vessel, a specialized complex of technical gadgetry and human skills. It sat where it had landed on top of a small hill on an unnamed planet far out among the rem-worlds. The crew set out to explore. Beyond the circle of ashes marking the blast of the ship's retro rockets stretched a gentle landscape. Green trees of varied shapes and textures covered softly rolling hills and small ravines. Bright-colored birds flitted through the woods. The sky was a picture-book blue. A rain shower passed swiftly, leaving the earth and trees dripping and sweet smelling. The ecological team pronounced it not only the most beautiful landscape they had ever seen, but the healthiest and most profuse: a landscape of exquisite balance.

On the second day the socioanthropolitical team found the village—a score of simple adobe-like buildings roofed in thatch and timber and grouped around a small square paved with hard burnt brick. The natives were handsome and strong. Even the very-old, though wrinkled, were erect and fit. Shortly after sunrise most of the men left for work in the nearby communal fields, or went off to hunt and fish. The women remained in the village, weaving, shaping and firing earthen pots, and preparing food. They worked outside on a raised wooden platform shaded with boughs that stood at the front of each house. The older women gossiped and tended the small children. The older men supervised the older children at their seemingly endless pastime of painting and repainting elaborate geometric designs on the house walls.

At night when the men returned to the village, each family would gather to eat in a small garden in the rear of their own dwelling. The evening meal over, the family would move onto the deck overlooking the plaza. Until dark the plaza was the focus of inter-family visiting: for talk, for a confusing sort of game played with bead counters, or just for children's play. The crew watched for a week. One day seemed like the next until the seventh day, which was a festival. Then the villagers sang and danced in the twilight.

On the Prometheus after the festival the atmosphere was heavy.

Ever since the second day there had been a growing sense of disquiet among the survey team specialists. The natives had been friendly but reserved. But some things were hard to explain. The economist could not find evidence of money or even barter. Every time the mathematician thought he had the counter game figured out, he became confused again. The linguist, even with the hypno-learn headphones, had been unable to master anything more than the simplest elements of the language. Four days before, a young boy had fallen out of a fruit tree in his back garden and gotten a nasty compound fracture of his right arm. By the time the medicrew got to the village, the boy had been carried, screaming, into his house. The father had been polite but firm—no uninvited visitors in his house. Thirty hours later the boy was climbing the same tree and swinging by his right arm. Only the sociologists and anthropologists were happy. So delighted were they studying the “heretofore unmatched integration of cultural manifestations” noted in their reports that they would not take time to talk about the most troubling question of all: Why were the natives not only unawed by the off-worlders, but just plain uninterested in them?

Any science fiction fan has probably read a dozen stories that start like that. The answer is always revealed unexpectedly: the sympathetic sociologist is invited to an initiation ceremony, a native girl falls in love with a crewman and spills the beans, a lost explorer stumbles across the local teleportation booth, or the village headman announces that the survey team has been tested and found mature enough to be told the truth. The answer is always the same. The backward natives are not backward at all. They control, in fact, a technology far superior to that possessed by the Prometheans—a technology matched with an equally sophisticated development of the social sciences. After troubled centuries of development they have completely absorbed their technological gadgetry and have chosen to live in scattered pastoral settlements, practicing a simple, satisfying life relieved by ceremonial customs and rites based on the soundest of social and psychological principles.

Meanwhile
back on Earth
in 1969:

Just east of Albuquerque, U.S. Highway 66, the great mid-twentieth century folk-trail from St. Louis to L.A. meets the mountains. There in Tijeras Canyon it crosses Highway 10. Taking 10 south, one drives through twenty miles of U.S. Forest Service land, wooded mountain country relieved by a few signs and houses on isolated

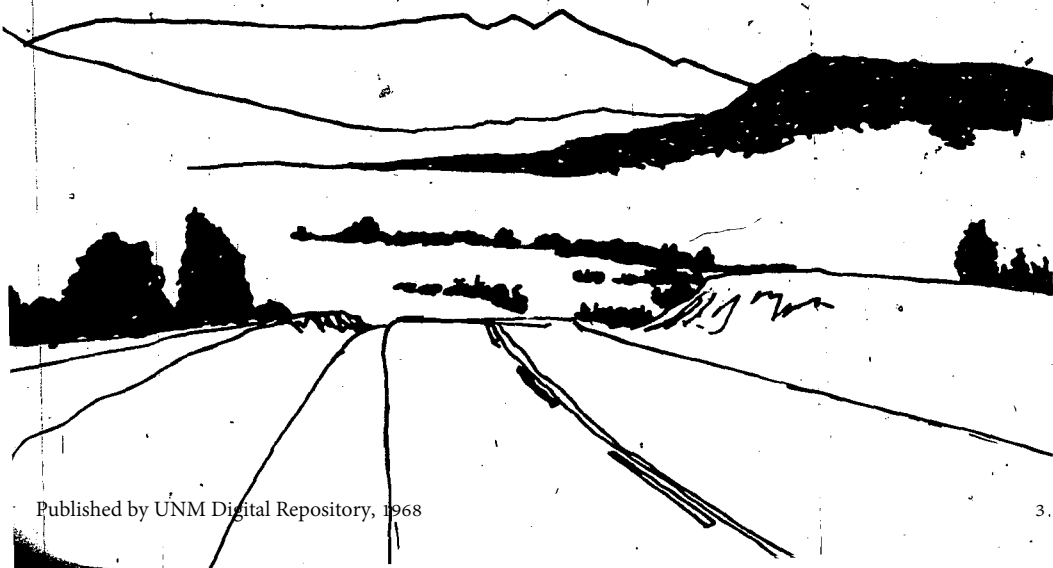
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private holdings. Three villages, almost deserted, then appear: Cedro, Yrissari, Escobosa. The Forest Service lands and the woods end. The mountains and trees fall back, five miles west of the road. To the east the mountains disappear altogether, and one looks out over the Estancia Basin, a great plain of range land and saltbeds. Driving along with the plain on the left, the mountains on the right, one passes through more villages—first, Chilili, and then the four Spanish villages in Torrance County—Tajique, Torreon, Manzano, and Punta de Agua.

The four villages sit right along the road, just at the edge of the wooded foothills. The villages begin and end quickly; the houses are mostly clustered together. The walls of the buildings are of local rough layered stone or adobe, plastered over or left exposed and washing back to earth. Some outbuildings are of jacal construction: poles driven into the earth stockade fashion, wired together, the spaces filled with plaster. The roofs are peaked and of metal—some painted, most rusted. The towns are red—red dirt roads, red stone, red adobe and mortar and plaster, red-rusted roofs, red-rusted cans—all the red of the landscape.

Less than five-hundred people live in these four villages now; they are mostly school-age children and older people. There are no jobs. A villager works elsewhere—during the week, or for months at a time—or takes relief. The juvenile delinquency rate of the county is the highest in the state. The educational drop-out rate is high and climbing. The influence of the church is waning. Priests, many of them unfamiliar with either the language or the customs, stay for a short while and are transferred elsewhere. Family ties are strong, but inter-family animosity is strong too, and of long duration. Those families not on relief resent those who are. There is no cooperation between the towns, but a nasty-petty rivalry. No streets off the high-



way are paved; few are even gravelled. Electricity is available and used; phone service is available but little used. Each town has a usable domestic water system, but each needs major reworking, and Punta constantly finds its well running dry. The four towns support a total of two small general stores, two gas pumps, and two bars—both in Torreon. These towns are dying.

A postindustrial society could raise the level of services and amenities in the countryside to that of the city. The gadgetry which could do this has been explained often enough: in science fiction, in the many futurist journals sprouting up all over the world, in the think-tank monographs, in *The World In 1984* and in the *Year 2000*. A postindustrial society could do much more. It could free people to live where they choose—it is that simple. And that choice might well be determined by the selection of a life style defined by physical and social amenities.

The creation of an environment with amenities for living may offer more hope for the ultimate survival of hundreds of small towns than low taxes and cheap labor ever did. This is because more and more Americans are becoming less concerned about the getting of goods than about finding a place in which to enjoy them.¹

Some people to whom the lack of jobs or decent services are unimportant—the wealthy, the artists and writers, the early retirees, the hippies—are seeking these amenities now. As the level of services in the countryside improves and as employment becomes less and less a prerequisite of locational choice, many more will join them. A postindustrial society will place a much greater value on its countryside. The questions are, what values will that society be seeking there, and how could the rural and small town landscape be planned to provide these values? What might the postindustrial landscape look like?

Is it not possible that the postindustrial landscape will have a network of communities like the futurist village described in the beginning of this article? Postindustrial man might well choose his village by its beauty, its climate, its feeling of containment and its community. Suppose, now, men in 1969 were to start work in Torrance County and its Spanish hill villages, to make these villages take on some of the qualities postindustrial men will seek—and climate needs no improvement in New Mexico. Where would such work begin?

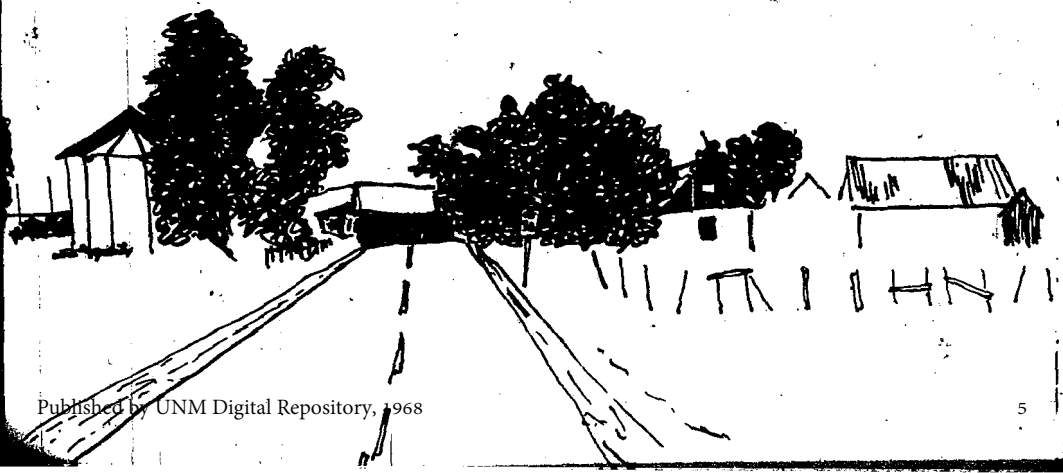
We would begin with the local landscape—the landscape that

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begins where the Forest Service lands end, twenty miles south of U.S. 66, and where it stretches some thirty miles along highway 10 through Punta, the southernmost hill village. What are the visual essentials of that landscape? It is like a dry-land coastline. From the west the wooded mountains send down fingers of green. That green once extended fuzzily out over the plain. Then the bean farmers came. They cleared the juniper and pinon. Now the limits are clear cut. The wooded parts of the plain are small, surviving on an occasional rise of land, shapes of a clear and distinct geometry. The villages are set between the green rocky fingers of foothills, or at their fringes, like ports in coves. The road follows that break in terrain and vegetation, or cuts abruptly across it, like some great causeway. East of the road the land is flat, the houses few. Here is the sea of silvery green range grass relieved by the occasional wooded island or a ghost gray ranch house of a ship.

Men of 1969 would observe how settlers took to this land. Anglos settled wide apart on ranches for economic reasons. The Spanish settled where the ecology breaks, as the Pueblo Indians did before them. They built their villages in tight clusters for defense, and because of their land grant customs. Visual feelings played little part. But they settled just right. They enhanced that landscape with their buildings. Men today could do no better than to follow the examples of these early settlers. East of the road, settle ranch style—one dwelling per six hundred forty acres, density down to a house per hundred acres only if four or six houses can be clustered together on one full section within an area comparable to that of the traditional ranch complex with its house, windmill, outbuildings and trees. Along the road and west of it build to village density—six to twelve houses per acre. Infill the villages. For more people, build new hamlets, as dense and contained as the old ones. Have two density extremes: village or ranch; in between means only the loss of the landscape.



And a sense of place, a variety of feeling—how do men establish these? Begin by filling in the villages, where a sense of place exists. Build and rebuild along the existing streets and around the small plazas. Use adobe and local stone and metal roofs. This is one of the few parts of the country where a man can still build much of his house with his own hands, without worrying about building codes and plumb-walls. For the postindustrial urban refugee, building in the hill villages could be a satisfying part of a life, a process of adding on and changing and repairing with his own work, just as it has always been for the villagers.

And how would men landscape? The villagers planted well—an occasional apple orchard, but always the tall bright green-leaved poplars and cottonwoods, standing out from the muted tones of dark evergreens or grayish grass or red earth, saying that here is where people live. New hamlets would be started at the edge of the foothills or along the road. They could have their own architecture, though the traditional materials would still be best. They should be tight and clustered, always, and they should respect the land. They should have a variety of place and view, some exploiting the big sky looking over the basin, others seeking the sheltered enclosure of short wooded vistas into the hills.

There is a special regional character to the high, arid, sparsely settled Southwest. This land has two dominant visual characteristics. The first is its rich and varied ecology. New Mexico contains six of the seven life zones existing in the United States. Three of these life zones lie within a twenty-five minute drive from the hill villages in Torrance county. The second is the landscape's overpowering scale, its loneliness. This is a big land, a land where one can sometimes see a hundred miles: a phenomenon not just of clean and clear air but of land forms, sharp, jagged, colored, shadowed forms that define and exaggerate distances. It is mostly an empty land, a land where fences and power poles and billboards not only give a scale but offer welcome reminders that there are, after all, people somewhere about. Along with its fine climate, this land's chief amenities are its ecology and its scale. But both of them are terribly fragile. A handful of people in the wrong place will erode the land and shatter its awesome impact. The clustering of settlements is a wise approach to all of rural America. Here it is essential. The carrying of suburbia into this countryside would mean its destruction.

Perhaps this is a naïve dream: the hope that we can resettle the countryside to a new scale and new living patterns, the hope that we might accept restrictions and learn to tend and care for the

landscape. But what other solutions are planners proposing for our urban problems? Massive renewal for our central cities? Or a restructuring and diversification of our suburbs to provide jobs and housing for blue collar workers and blacks from the ghettos? Or the building of vast new towns of hundreds of thousands of people, pristine examples of the planners' order and the designers' art, sitting self-contained in the open country? These proposals are no cheaper, no less naïve than the idea of selective renewal for hundreds of existing villages, towns, and small cities that possess histories and offer differing life styles. Perhaps all these ideas are valuable. The naïve dreams of less than a decade ago are working programs now. Perhaps before another decade passes, the problems of our cities will force us to turn our dream of a functioning countryside into a sensitive and sensible program.

NOTES

1. Albert Solnit, "What's the Use of a Small Town?", *Landscape*, XVI, 1 (Autumn, 1966), 3-6.

