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# Modern Pastoralism and the Middle Landscape

Peter G. Rowe

According to commonplace definitions, a myth is a story that expresses and symbolizes deep-seated and exemplary aspects of human existence. Moreover, it often sets out to resolve conflict or to allow reconciliation of two otherwise antithetical positions (Campbell 1959). To some scholars, like Cassirer, a myth is simply a kind of perspective, not necessarily involved directly with storytelling (Cassirer 1955). To others, like Eliade, myth is an important mode of "collective thinking" (Eliade 1960). Throughout, the importance of myth to the poetic mode of consciousness comes by way of the stable unifying framework it provides, from which to interpret a given reality (Preminger 1965). This provision of stability and unification is particularly important in the modern era, when a broad common understanding of mythic themes appears to be either lacking or taken for granted.

One such conjunction of myth and reality affects the daily lives of most Americans. Shortly after World War II, America became a nation of predominantly suburban dwellers. Today the suburban proportion of metropolitan development stands at about sixty-five percent, spatially distributed across a sprawling landscape, somewhere in character between city and countryside. The urban-rural synthesis that is affected by this "middle landscape" combines and fuses two rather different ideas and viewpoints. They are: a pastoral perspective and a modern technical orientation. The result is a mythopoetic concept of "modern pastoralism."



Pastoralism: Views from different times ("The Oxbow" by Thomas Cole, 1836 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and

## The Pastoral Perspective

"Pastoralism" is an expansive and venerable topic. Basically it concerns rural life, its more rapturous aspects and its simple nobility. Far from being a realistic portrayal of actual country life, pastoralism is an artistic and ideological motif and seeks to transcend the ordinary by describing a better world (Panofsky 1957 and Preminger 1965).

As literary theme and literary form, pastoralism and the "pastoral" are firmly rooted in the Greco-Roman tradition. Theocritus' "idyls," for instance, date from the third century B.C. Later it was Virgil, through his "Eclogues," who refined, consolidated and popularized the conventions of pastoral poetry (Preminger 1965). In fact, it is his name that we most clearly associate with this literary form and its connection with antiquity's Golden Age.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the English countryside was literally transformed into idealized pastoral settings. There, pastoral designs were chosen by the "establishment" and newly rich because of their backward references and piety. Gardeners like Gilpin even referred to it as "moral gardening" (Hunt and Willis 1975). Nevertheless, it was also a way of masking social inequities and of legitimizing the individual accumulation of capital.

In his classic work on pastoralism in American life, Leo Marx distinguishes two kinds of pastoralism. The first he refers to as being “popular and sentimental” and the second “imaginative and complex.” In the popular and sentimental version there is a simple juxtaposition of the ideal of rural life against the “moral vice and depravity of the city.” By being close to nature and retreating into “primitive self” you become not only a better person but someone who is hap-

Rather than presenting a clear alternative, “imaginative and complex pastoralism” strikes a dialectical relationship between “opposing” forces of city and countryside. Like the Virgilian shepherd contemplating his arcadian landscape, there is an attempt to resolve any conflict between the different worlds (Marx 1964, p. 22f). Ralph Waldo Emerson’s tract “Nature,” of 1836, clearly establishes and develops this theme. However, not only is his “romantic pastoralism” a middle-

The preoccupation of Americans with their natural circumstances, even as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century, is understandable given the relatively undeveloped state of the continent at that time. Many authors have described how unlike Europe America really was in the early years of its settlement, and the sheer fascination they had for its wilderness (Smith 1950, Nash 1982 and Machor 1987). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the strong American tradi-

The nineteenth century was also a time at which the emergence of pastoral themes in landscape painting could be seen, especially in works by Thomas Cole. In several of his major canvasses both rural scenes and wilderness landscapes were presented, suggesting not only two different points of view but a transition from one of the other as well. As Barbara Novak insightfully points out the true wilderness was rapidly vanishing under the onslaught of development, raising a problem for, as she put it, “...America’s religion of God-in-nature” (Novak 1976, p 45). Into this breach fell pastoralism. What better way to endorse the “...civilizing of the American wilderness in the name of progress’ than by the transformation of the wilderness into a pastoral Garden of Eden, a rural paradise that “humanized” the impact of development (Novak 1976, p. 45f).

In the contemporary period pastoral devices persist, although designs often appear to have gone through another transformation. In Rackshaw Downe’s “The Coke Works of Clainton, Pa.,” for instance, painted in 1975, a romantic view of a sprawling coke works is portrayed, framed by a distinctly pastoral setting. Through luminous colored smoke and stark figural outlines, the coke mill is made to appear intriguing and object-like in its setting. The painting not only has the justifying effect on man’s technological development that Novak pointed to, but it seems to take another step in the historical progression of pastoral themes as well, namely from wilderness, to rural landscape, to agriculture, to industry and, now, back in the other direction. It is a “complex pastoral” image, but one in which the relative dominance of terms is reversed. It remains, nevertheless, a hopeful presentation, optimistic about stemming the industrial tide with a shift into a more cultivated “middle ground.”

James Machor recently built on Leo Marx’s conceptual framework and developed the concept of “urban



central Massachusetts, 1986

pily insulated and sheltered from “big city life” (Marx 1964, p. 12f). Many popular versions of the western frontier myth and the commune life of the “counterculture” are examples of this sentiment (Smith 1950 and O’Neill 1971). The most important aspect is pastoralism as an alternative to urbanism where the primitive hero retreats into the countryside and “...locates value as far as possible from organized society” (Marx 1964, p. 22).

ground between opposing forces of civilization and nature, it is also in a pre-eminent relationship to those forces. “Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us,” he wrote (Emerson 1836, p. 10). Thus the identity of man and nature is transcendently established by constructive reflection on both circumstances. Primary direction is still provided through nature, however, via the method of equating “moral laws” with “natural laws.”

tion of landscape painting, ranging from largely descriptive chronicles of nature’s moods to the awesomely sublime. By the end of the first third of the nineteenth century, this interest in the wilderness landscape was also closely aligned with the beginnings of an era of optimism that accompanied the “Jacksonian Revolution.” In the affirmation of an American culture that was distinctly American, wilderness themes were a rather obvious recourse (Czestochowski 1982).

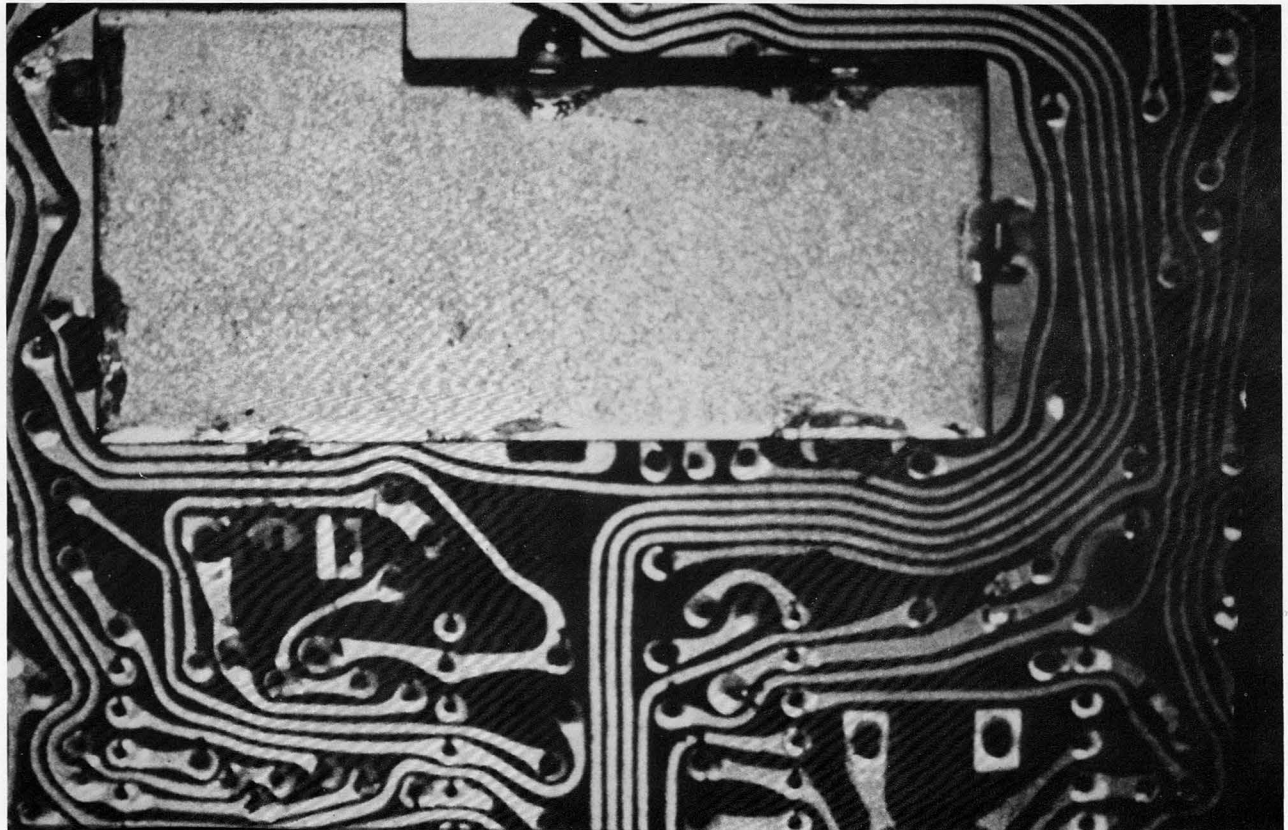
pastoralism" (Machor 1987). This he distinguishes from the earlier "simple" and "complex" versions of pastoralism by placing an emphasis on integration and on differences in moral tone. For Machor, "urban pastoralism" is an urban-rural synthesis that is bent on a kind of urban reformation. Contrary to the Greco-Roman pedigree of pastoralism *per se*, the roots of "urban pastoralism" lie in biblical visions of a reconstituted city. In short, the root metaphor is the Judeo-Christian concept of Isaiah's and St. John the Divine's "new Jerusalem" and, as such, it carries with it both the mythic ideas of redemption and a paradise to be regained (Machor 1987).

In this account, the change in moral tone is located by the difference between individualism and cooperative society. Whereas the pastoral idea connotes "individual freedom" in a landscape devoid of "corporate society," "urban pastoralism" emphasizes "personal fulfillment with a co-operative identity" (Machor 1987, p. 13). Of interest here is adoption of a modern American presence of corporate-government within the pastoral concept.

In summary, pastoralism is a cornerstone of American intellectual and artistic experience, particularly when it comes to location of appropriate grounds for human settlement. While it never denies the self-enlightening and moral benefits to be gained by rural existence neither does it deny technological developments. Most often, however, the pastoral perspective is a reminder of basic, honest social values.

### The Modern Technocultural Orientation

The "modern technical orientation" is sustained by three complementary ideas. They are: 1) a technological way of making things; 2) a technocratic way of managing things; and 3) at root, a scientific way of interpreting man and his world. Unlike pastoralism with its overwhelming association to a particular kind of place, the modern technical orientation



A Modern Technical Orientation: metaphor and reality (An electronic circuit)

and temperament is ubiquitous and primarily concerned with a mode of acting in the world.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States had surpassed all European rivals to become the largest manufacturing country in the world (Habakkuk 1962). This rapid rise from an agrarian economy only a century earlier was largely due to the influence of mass production, or what was referred to as the "American system of manufacture" (Sparke 1987). In fact, by about 1850, American industry had developed a generic kind of industrial production process that was structurally different from European counterparts. Instead of relying on individual craftsmen to produce unique products, anonymous engineers within a mechanical production process designed and produced identical components that were then assembled into products (Habakkuk 1962). This approach, once a commitment was made to a particular product line, had the twin advantages of speed of manufacture and

ease of later repair and maintenance. The key was standardization of product components and a high level of interchangeability of those components to produce other, different products (Sparke 1987).

Over time, necessity, opportunity and technological know-how produced an American way of making things that centered on high capital investment, high division of labor, quantity production, as well as variety within standardization and mass marketing. Its appeal was broad access to perceived improvements in the material quality of life, whereas, its romance was a matter of apparent conquest over the forces of nature. To build a car that almost everyone could afford, to break the sound barrier, to put a man on the moon and to perform thousands of complex calculations per second, at the time, seemed magical. However, and this is perhaps why the romance continued, they were also feats that seemed almost inevitable.

Much of this optimism and a similar style of thinking carried over into the management of daily affairs. In addition to making things, performance of services, arrival at important decisions and the direction of activities were now taken on as technical matters involving correct application of information and expertise.

By the end of the first decade of this century, Frederick W. Taylor and others were busily devising and developing scientific principles for the control and management of seemingly even the simplest of tasks. So-called "time-and-motion studies" were performed for all manner of activities, ranging from the domestic environment of kitchens to industrial assembly lines. Corporations, with the expectation of higher profits became fascinated by these exercises and developed production management procedures accordingly (Haber 1964).

Another similar episode followed World War II, during which special analytical techniques were developed for better



and "Shoppers Worlds," Framingham, Massachusetts, a photo by Carolyn Leaman, 1986).

understanding and for being able to abstractly manipulate complex arrangements of activities. Soon corporations and government bureaucracies were making applications to a wide variety of enterprises. Management quickly became an arcane field for technical experts. Information, vital for operations, became increasingly specialized, placing unprecedented demands on its storage, collation and dissemination (Kaufman 1968).

At the very core of these technical ways of making and doing things was a firm belief in a scientific interpretation of man and his world (Bernstein 1976 and Rowe 1987). According to this belief, not only was the natural world validly subject to scientific analysis but a science of human behavior was also possible. Furthermore, the results of this science could be used effectively to create operational models, whereby abstract representations of phenomena, like transportation and housing choice, were created and manipulated in order to predict patterns

of human behavior (Chadwick 1972). Very real difficulties came, however, when moving from the realm of "facts," by which this perspective was shaped, to those of "value," by which it was not.

### Modern Pastoralism

Conceptually, the conjunction of pastoralism with a modern technical orientation brings with it several interesting asymmetries. Pastoralism, for instance, is strongly rooted in a particular kind of spatial domain. Even in its "complex" or "urban-pastoral" forms it cannot be removed very far from the countryside and special attributes like rusticity, a cultivated landscape, domestication of the wilderness, and so on. By contrast, the modern technical orientation is ubiquitous, as mentioned earlier. Fundamentally it is not about "place," or "a place" in any particular sense. It is a temperament and an attitude that can just as easily exist in urban as well as rural areas.

Another dimension along which the two terms seem to differ is the distinction that can be made between "means" and "ends." The modern technical orientation is much more about means and "ways of doing things" than it is about ends, or the purposes to which the means are to be put. Superficially anyway, pastoralism is the reverse. It prescribes a state of being in the world, and an outcome that is rather well defined.

A certain terminological slipperiness and equivocation arises, however, when one also realizes that pastoralism, in its sophisticated forms, is also a way of understanding the world and, according to people like Emerson, of transcending the immediate experience of both civilization and nature. Likewise, the logical-empirical orthodoxy at the core of the modern technical orientation can suffer in practice from a kind of "means-ends" conflation.

Modern Pastoralism also exhibits an asymmetrical arrangement of the two in-

herent concepts when used to interpret suburban metropolitan development. For instance, in outward appearance, the domestic environment of "home and garden" strongly favors the pastoral scene of a traditional cottage in a cultivated landscape. In its period style kitsch, it is often a naive and nostalgic pastoral presentation, although more complex forms can lurk below the surface. Nevertheless, behind American suburban residential development there is often a sort of moral superiority and a sense of escape from the perceived decay of the city (Clark 1986).

The modern office park usually presents a more complex pastoral form in which the two parts to the equation are starkly contrasted. The garden setting is typically landscaped in a "natural picturesque" manner, often reminiscent of eighteenth and nineteenth-century English garden traditions. By contrast, the office buildings themselves usually bask resplendently in a highly abstract, well-engineered rational aesthetic. The resulting ensemble is very much a case of a "machine in the garden" (after Marx 1965).

The environments of commercial retail shopping centers pull the equation further in a technological direction. Basically, they are rationalized and functionally explicit and largely devoid of garden landscapes, except in rather precious preserves. The pastoral perspective is almost entirely missing within the complexes themselves, becoming more apparent only in their larger setting. However, if one concentrates on examples with a highly articulated landscape architecture a stronger pastoral orientation quickly becomes reasserted.

Apart from asymmetries, there is a strict oppositional quality to the two terms inherent in modern pastoralism. For its part, there is organic "oneness" to the idea of knowing the world under pastoralism. A framework is provided through which, as Leo Marx put it, "resolution" can be achieved. Once again, the shepherd does

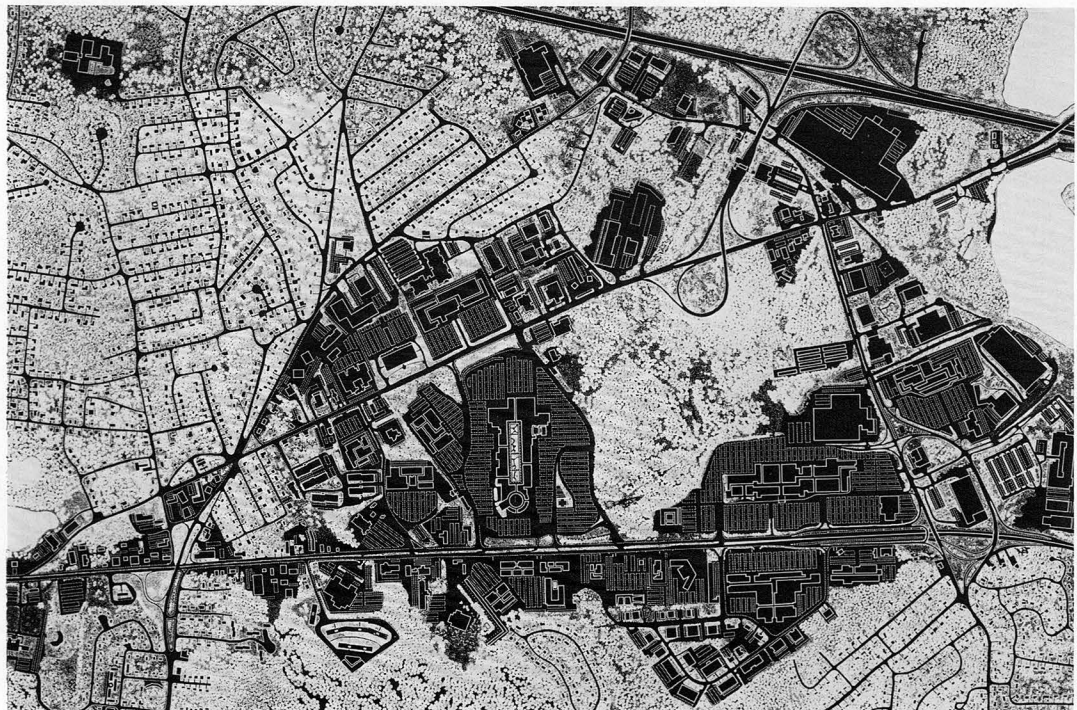
not try and escape his immediate world to another place but, rather, he tries to “resolve” any inherent differences (Marx 1964, p. 19f). In complete contrast, knowing, according to the modern technical temperament, is a specialized and compartmentalized undertaking. There are different disciplines to be mastered, each with its own special language and technical accompaniment. Moreover, “organic knowing,” at least in some versions of pastoralism, is of the senses, whereas the technical temperament is far more dispassionate and intellectual.

When taken together the two terms in “modern pastoralism” can forge a powerful and critical ideology. Abstractly speaking, this critical stance works in a reciprocal manner. First, the pastoral side of the ideological equation bounds the technical orientation by clearly establishing the terrain and many of the preferred outcomes for urban development. Second, for its part, the modern technical orientation maintains productivity and prevents the pastoral inclination from stagnating or from sliding into a useless wilderness. A more concrete example of this interplay can be found in the use of conservation to manage and redirect technological developments in the energy and real estate industries. A benign semi-rural life can be promoted, in turn, by technological improvements. Admittedly, in this day and age of sophisticated technology, it is far more likely to find the pastoral side of the ideological equation being pressed into service. In fact, it is precisely because of the potential of such a realignment that modern pastoralism holds out so much promise as the metaphorical context for contemporary metropolitan urban development.

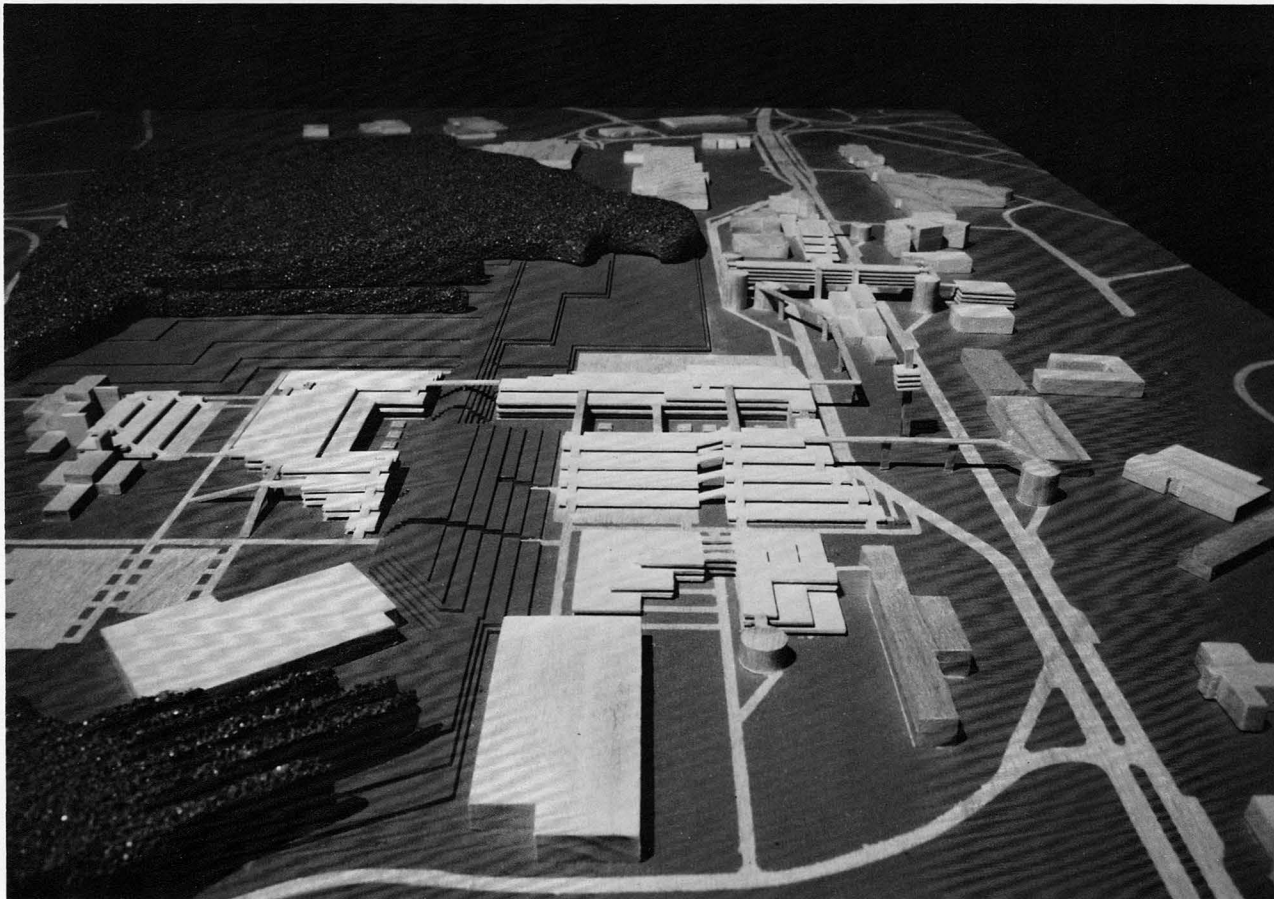
Beyond processes of control and self-regulation, where one side of the ideological equation is made to work, so to speak, on the other, the true “critical” dimension comes from the insights and knowledge that are gained. Placement of the pastoral perspective and the modern technical orientation in an effective reciprocal relationship provides such a



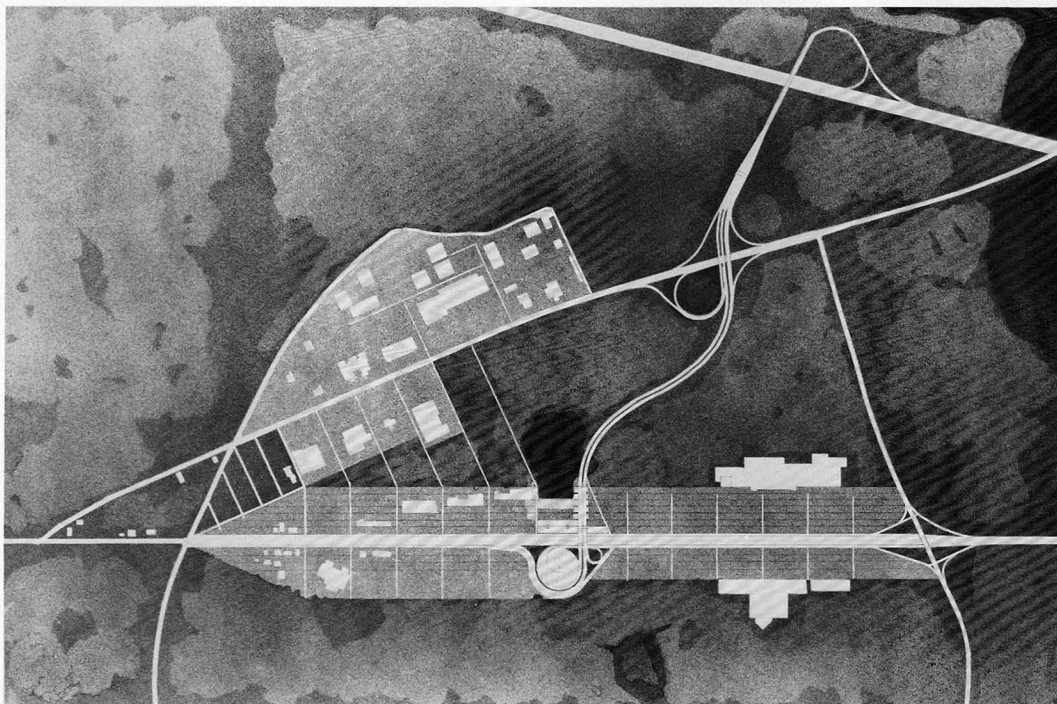
Modern Pastoralism: two versions (A rural scene in Oklahoma, 1982)



Re-structuring the Middle Landscape (Framingham and Natick, drawn by Glenn Forley)



project by Vasilios Tsakalos, 1987).



project by Donna Paley, 1987).

critical impetus to modern pastoralism. No doubt this is easier said than done. Nevertheless, it is what design in a "middle landscape" should attempt to accomplish.

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