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Big Parcels: Modernist Planning in Washington State History

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Abstract *In anthropology's spatial turn, cultural anthropologists directed portions of their attention to the spaces in which human habitation takes shape. This article concerns the large planned spaces configured in the Modernist era of the twentieth century. Utilizing a fieldwork-based methodology that draws on the ethnographic toolkit, analysis compares and contrasts three large planned spaces located in Washington State: the former site of the Northern State Mental Hospital in Sedro-Woolley, the location in central Spokane at which Expo 74 was hosted, and the rural location of the never-completed Satsop Nuclear Facility near Elma, Washington. Our analysis suggests the singular use for which these sites were once constructed poses challenges for reconfiguring them to contemporary use. Notably, those sites with interconnections to nearby communities, and those that conjure or draw upon a broader social memory of place, have fared better in their path to the present.*

Keywords

Urban planning, Washington State, urban space, urban anthropology.

Introduction: Modernist Urban Planning

This article, the accompanying photographs, and the project underlying it are concerned with the expansive units of urban development that emerged as the quintessential spatial form in the Modernist era of urban planning. Those units of urban planning are one sort of large parcel to be found in the contemporary landscape of the city, of the state, and of the nation. Although “big plans” and other sorts of spatially grandiose ambitions trace their taproots to the very origins of the city, it was in the Modernist era that those parcels became

the commonplace vehicle for the progressive aspirations of the nation-state and its varied constituents (Kolson 2001). Chronologies of the Modernist era remain a matter of much debate, but there's no need for them to detain us here: we envision the Modernist era stretching from the latter portions of the nineteenth century into the early 1970s.¹ What came next, as many have suggested, was post-Modernist. Perhaps it's also worth noting that the Modernist paradigm with which we are inevitably concerned has had a massive impact on our planet's built landscape, particularly in terms of the planning and the design of our cities, our towns, and their constituent structures. And while Modernism

¹ And perhaps, as Jencks (1977:23) once suggested, the Modernist era decisively concluded on July 15, 1972, at 3:32 PM, with the planned demolition of architect Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex in St. Louis.

first arose in the context of the developed global north, in the twentieth century this paradigm's influence and its impact suffused the planning and design of almost everything on the planet (Holston 1989; Scott 1998; Lu 2011).

Defining the content of the Modernist paradigm poses its own challenges, and attempts to extrapolate that definition have been the subject of entire books and durable scholarly conversations, both of which permeated much of the past century. Although the ideas comprising twentieth century Modernism sprawl across various realms of our societies, James Scott (1998:89–90) famously glimpsed “high modernism” in the “supreme self-confidence about continued linear progress, the development of scientific and technical knowledge, the expansion of production, the rational design of social order, the growing satisfaction of human needs, and, not least, an increased control over nature (including human nature) commensurate with scientific understanding of natural laws.” Thinking about cities and urban space more specifically, James Holston (1989:9) emphasized the abstract nature of Modernist thinking, and the concomitant “total decontextualization” of plans and planning from the local milieu and what preceded the present. Luckily, in cities and the built landscape of contemporary society, the abstractions of Modernism often take material and infrastructural form.

One aspect of this paradigm's deep influence on the shape of our cities today can be found in the sort of buildings that we've inherited from that era. Consider, for example, one of the aging shopping malls you might have encountered in a recent decade. Or think of the hulking Brutalist towers that pepper the centers and suburbs of the American urban landscape, and many other places as well. Basic, efficient, undecorated—both Brutalist towers and the aging shopping mall are quotidian manifestations of urban planning in the Modernist image. One might also sight the Modernist legacy in the zoning policies that spatially structure and organize many cities. Indeed, these zoning policies actually reveal

another important feature of the Modernist paradigm: nestled deep in its folds is a penchant for organization and a commitment to order, the twin objectives to which zoning policies were long dedicated (Montgomery 2013). By those policies' logic, order might be created by sorting and organizing society in space. Industry was to be located here; residential districts were thought to belong there and there and there; commercial districts might occupy a spot here and another there; public housing should be located over there; and parks and other green spaces—the “lungs of the city,” as Frederick Law Olmsted famously called them—should permeate the urban landscape as much as possible. We should recognize this penchant for order, foremost, as a form of governance. And in that sense, those sorts of policies reveal the progressive ambitions at the heart of the Modernist paradigm, and return us to the abstractions of the paradigm's definition: in constructing the ideal city, the Modernist planner sought to engineer a better society (Holston 1989; Scott 1998).

As an ambitious and dedicatedly progressive paradigm that reached its apex midway through the twentieth century, Modernism's historical legacy is replete with notoriously ambitious men. One interesting premise underpinning this project is that those grand ambitions took spatial form in the built landscape of that era. Consider the implications: the progressivist ambitions of the Modernist paradigm are woven into the urban landscapes that we've inherited from that recent past. With this project, we are interested foremost in the very size of the parcels that accommodated Modernist planners' plans (Koolhaas and Mau 1995; Kolson 2001; Augé 2008) (see Figure 1). We suggest these big parcels and the plans they accommodate yield a vista point on the urban spatial discourse undergirding the planning of that era. That is, we think an analysis of these big Modernist parcels might reveal something about the paradigm that produced them, and about the way of thinking that normalized these spaces and these progressivist ambitions.

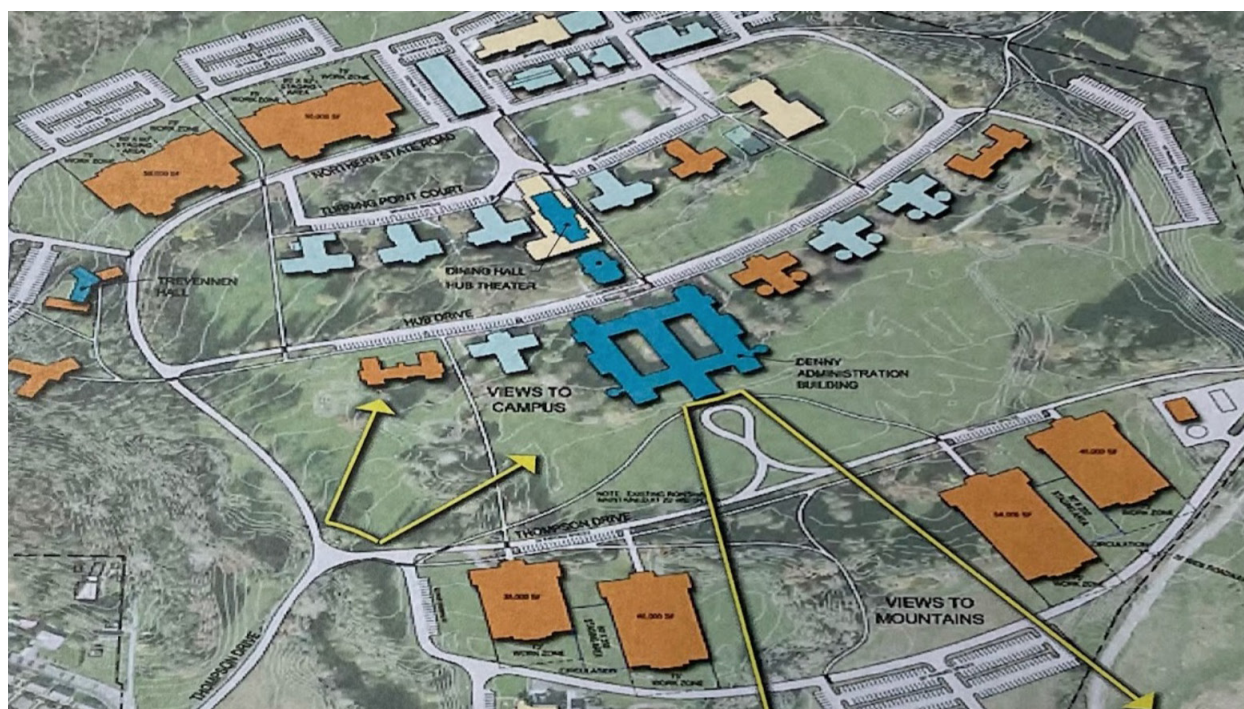


Figure 1. An image of a map of the Northern State Hospital's central campus area, on display at the Sedro-Woolley Museum. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2022.

As this suggests, in part our concerns are academic in nature. We are interested in the global proliferation of these big parcels in the urban landscape, and more broadly, with the proliferation of the urban spatial discourse they exemplify. We're interested in the permutations and the evolution of these sorts of big parcels over the arc of the Modernist era. And with numerous scholars pointing to the enduring Modernist elements to be found in the post-Modernist era, we are equally interested in the perseverance and the various fates of these big parcels in our present world (Augé 2008). But there's more of potential value here than simply these academic issues, for our concerns are also practical and applied in nature. What features or aspects of these different parcels' historical experiences overlap, and what patterns might we discern therein? What sorts of problems seem to percolate to the fore in the various cases we consider? Are there viable strategies for retrofitting these parcels and spaces, and how might that retrofitting better serve our needs in the contemporary era? Should we draw any

lessons from this history, and how might those lessons shape planning today? Under what conditions might these and other big parcels emerge as vibrant and functional features of the contemporary built landscape?

To address these questions and explore these concerns, we utilized a small constellation of different methods and approaches. To assemble a set of comparable cases for our analysis, we relied heavily on archival research, and coupled that archival research with interviews and various other sorts of interactions with community members and other persons somehow tethered to one or the other of these three different parcels. Our concerns with the spatial aspect of these parcels' existence resulted in a reliance on photography and cartography, both of which were deeply integrated into our research plan. Finally, we sought to gauge the contemporary vitality of these spaces using a set of methods that are essentially ethnographic in nature: at each of the three sites considered here, we conducted observations specifically tailored to assess these parcels' contemporary social life.

Altogether, our methods blended ethnography, and its emphasis on “being there,” with the observational commitments pioneered long ago by the Parisian Situationists who endeavored to discern the “psychogeography” of a place, and to do so with the experiential method of the *dérive* that might reveal it (Debord 1956; Mumford 1961; McDonough 2009; Saunders 2010; Wolfe 2016; Gardner n.d.).

Although large parcels, and, therefore, the vestiges of the ambitious, totalizing plans that once produced these spaces can be found in an array of different contexts around the world, in this article we analyze three of these big parcels found in the United States, and more specifically, here in Washington State, where both authors reside. Our selection of these parcels was haphazard—we selected parcels that had previously piqued our interest, and parcels that were geographically diverse. Coincidentally, those three parcels bookend the span of the Modernist era in urban planning: in historical order, our exploration examined the Northern State Mental Hospital grounds, first established in 1909 near the town of Sedro Woolley; the Expo 74 site located in central Spokane, whose construction commenced in 1973; and the Satsop Nuclear Facility in rural western Washington, where construction commenced in 1977 and ceased before completion in 1982.

In this article, we present the summaries of the three case studies before turning to the crux of our analysis.

The Northern State Hospital

Frederick Law Olmsted pioneered the field of landscape architecture; led the movement to weave parks and green spaces into America’s urban landscapes; and was singlehandedly responsible for a stunning constellation of plans for entire cities, tracts of suburbs, various campuses, and dozens of other features in the cities of his time. With such a stunning array of accomplishments, it’s been suggested that Olmsted singlehandedly shaped the look of an entire

continent with his life’s work (Cultural Landscape Foundation 2022). As one of the progenitors of the Modernist planning paradigm with which this article is concerned, his designs sought a sense of place that might be stimulated via the layout of the site itself, and by the integration of his designs with the regional landscape in which they were fitted (Buras 2019). The crown jewel and opening chapter of his life’s efforts was Manhattan’s Central Park. By the time his life drew to a close in a suburban Boston institution that he himself had designed, Frederick had also successfully passed the torch of his life’s work to his sons. Their designs and efforts would continue the Olmsted legacy (Ott 2019). As a result, the Olmsted brothers were particularly invested in the commission they received from Washington State in the early twentieth century—to design a mental institution in Skagit Valley, well north of Seattle. Working in conjunction with architects Saunders and Lawton, the Olmsted Brothers produced a holistic master plan for a campus that would provide patient care, foremost in the form of occupational therapy to be conveyed via the productive activities of a self-sustaining farm and other assorted manufacturing and productive on-site activities.

Commissioned in 1909 and operational by 1911, the Northern State Hospital campus is located on a low bluff some two miles east of the community of Sedro-Woolley, which had a population of about 2,100 at that time. Within years of opening, the parcel had expanded to more than 1,000 acres, and in addition to hospital facilities comprising more than a hundred buildings designed in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, the parcel included a lumber mill, a reservoir, a creamery, a quarry, a steam plant, various agricultural fields, an orchard, a greenhouse, assorted livestock, and an active dairy. In its heyday, the Northern State Hospital was the most crowded hospital in the state, and as many of the former employees relate, the patients and the employees formed a vibrant community in-and-of-themselves. Moreover, for decades of operation the parcel surpassed

the objective of sustainability—for much of its history, the working farm actually supplied other state institutions with food, goods, and other services produced on the working farm. In the oral histories woven into her book concerning the hospital, Mary J. McGoffin's interlocutors make it clear how the hospital and its operations were deeply entwined with the nearby community of Sedro-Woolley (McGoffin 2011). As one town resident related to us, "so many people in town still have personal connections with the hospital, either through their family or through work." Sedro-Woolley's history was interwoven with that of the hospital, and those connections were built over many successive decades in the twentieth century.

Operations at Northern State came to a halt in 1973, and many patients once housed there were shifted to community mental health centers or various other residential facilities. Still others were simply given a one-way bus ticket and the outdated street clothes in which they had once arrived. The book and popular film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was perhaps the most widely-recognized capstone of the broader public and political movement that, in the decade previous to the movie's release, had galvanized public sentiment against the institutional model for mental health care. Certainly, a wider awareness of the Nazi atrocities presaged the growing antipathy to the idea of institutionalized mental health care. But certainly, a variety of complex and interrelated processes coalesced in the broad movement to close institutions like Northern State Hospital.

In the decades following its closure, the parcel on which the hospital was located has fragmented into different uses and ownership. Skagit County purchased 726 acres of the parcel from the state of Washington, and the farm and pastures now comprise the Northern State Recreational Area. This portion of the parcel includes the field in which an estimated 1,500 deceased former patients are buried in unmarked graves. The Port of Skagit took ownership of the main campus in 2018, and under the moniker of the

SWIFT Center (Sedro Woolley Innovation for Tomorrow), and in collaboration with Skagit County and the city of Sedro Woolley, the port operates the facilities as it continues to map the parcel's path into the future. Portions of the hospital campus are open to the public; other portions have been demolished; still other portions are used for job corps training programs, for drug rehabilitation in-patient programs, and by an in-patient mental health facility like those that replaced the Northern State Hospital. Although much of the campus is now off-limits to the public, it retains a park-like sense of place. With the Olmsted's design and the Spanish Colonial Revival architecture of the remaining campus buildings, the site is also registered with various organizations that mark its cultural and architectural importance. A museum in Sedro-Woolley maintains a collection of material culture and other items garnered from the hospital's era of operation, and in the summer of 2022, a coalition of groups hosted a two-day event entitled "Remembering Northern State Public History Days."

Our multiple visits to the parcel were illuminating. On the campus itself, roofs were crumbling and impressive plate-glass windows lay shattered and broken (Figure 2). The dairy barn and other buildings on the former working farm were covered with graffiti, and combined with the fact that portions of the central campus were off limits to visitors, much of the parcel felt uncertain in nature, and unwelcoming to visitors. Conversely, although off limits, other portions of the campus were clearly in use, and the surrounding farmland, now the recreational area, was sometimes busy with visitors and members of the nearby community. Over multiple visits, we took note of people walking for exercise, numerous visitors walking their dogs on the various trails, and many children enjoying the afternoon in the northwestern sun. Indeed, traversing from the trails and open fields of the Northern State Recreational Area to the architectural remnants on the SWIFT campus felt like moving between two different



Figure 2. Both the Spanish Colonial Revival style of architecture, as well as the general decay of the structures, are clearly visible in the buildings accessible on the main campus. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2021.

settings—the former configured for visitors, and the latter containing an uncertain collage of signs that welcome, that seek to direct, or that otherwise warn visitors against entry into off-limits buildings and securitized portions of the campus.

Although the Northern State Hospital grounds were designed by the world's most esteemed planners of the period, in the contemporary era it is clearly a challenging parcel to manage and use, and a costly one to maintain. As Mary McGoffin (2011:102) noted, the parcel had been configured for “only one thing: the idea of an asylum for the mentally ill, an idea now extinct.” Configured for a singular large tenant, the verdant surrounding landscape has morphed into a seemingly successful recreational area. The central campus has been more difficult to steer through the contemporary world, and despite efforts, portions of the campus and the encompassing parcel remain in abandoned disrepair. The task of maintaining, retrofitting, and renting the campus buildings is only further challenged

by the aging structures and their design: the stucco of the Spanish Colonial Revival period is not ideal in the wet climate of the northwest, and the small rooms commonplace a century ago feel claustrophobic to modern sensibilities. Moreover, these challenges and associated costs are borne by a rural county with a minimal tax base. In summary, the Northern State Hospital site is clearly an albatross in the twenty-first century—an unwieldy accumulation of aging structures tucked into the foothills of the Northern Cascades. Despite these many and significant challenges, however, we encountered many links between the parcel and the community some two miles distant. The aforementioned museums and the weekend-long celebration of the memory of the hospital are just two facets of this durable tether to the community. Although it remains to be seen how the memory of this place will endure when the last generation of former employees passes away, the vibrant social memory of Northern State Hospital is clearly a vital factor in the successes that the parcel has encountered.

Expo 74 and Riverfront Park

In the waning decades of the nineteenth century, the city of Spokane was established around Havermale Island—the island that splits a set of large waterfalls and cataracts on the Spokane River. The waterfalls surrounding the island were an important fishing site for the Spokane people indigenous to the area, and the first American settlers to the region also periodically inhabited the island. As railroads began to reach into the Washington Territory, the island at the heart of the city became a key industrial site for the surrounding region and for the city at its core. Both the Northern Pacific and the Union Pacific railroads built extensive yards atop the island, and the river itself was increasingly harnessed for hydroelectric production (Youngs 1996). By the early 1960s, the largest urban waterfalls in the country were mostly obscured by a maze of urban infrastructural growth that had accumulated there over nearly a century. That same decade was a period of stagnation and blight for the industrial core of the city's central business district. Determined to revitalize the whole of the city, and inspired by Seattle's success hosting the 1962 World's Fair, a group of local businessmen formed Spokane Unlimited. Under the guidance of urban planner King Cole, the organization mapped out the process of remaking the dingy urban core of the city. They eventually settled on a plan to host an environmentally-themed world's fair, an event that would not only draw a legion of visitors to the city, but would also catalyze the urban redevelopment of the central business district and leave the city with an attractive recreational park at its heart.

The 100 acre Havermale Island became the centerpiece of these efforts to revitalize the city. In 1970, area businessmen contributed \$1.3 million to seed efforts to begin the process of bringing an exposition to Spokane. The next year, President Nixon officially recognized these efforts, and reflecting the ethos of the time, the Bureau of International Expositions subsequently

authorized the fair's tentative theme, "Progress Without Pollution." This theme would eventually morph into "Celebrating Tomorrow's Fresh, New Environment." Both versions reflected the convergence of Spokane's interests in revitalizing the urban core of the city with the growing public commitment to better stewardship of our planetary environment. Expo 74 President King Cole then persuaded Great Northern Railroad to donate 100 acres of Havermale and adjacent Cannon Islands to the city. Train yards, depots, and a variety of other industrial structures were quickly razed, and midway through 1973 the construction of the fairground's pavilions was underway. Opening day was May 3, 1974, and over the coming six months some five million visitors would stream to the site. Spokane became the smallest city to ever host a world's fair, and amongst other highlights, Expo 74 was the first exposition attended by the Soviet Union since 1928. In the final accounting, the exposition was widely considered an economic and thematic success, and the city of Spokane was left with the exposition site—the 100 acre island park—to anchor the city center. In dedicating the former site of the exposition as Riverfront Park in 1978, President Jimmy Carter noted that the park, "shows very clearly what can be accomplished in urban redevelopment. You've transformed an area that was declining, that was far short of its great potential, into one of the nation's most innovative and refreshing urban settings" (Carter 1978).

In the intervening years, almost all of the structures from Expo 74 have been removed or replaced with other facilities. In 2014, the citizens of Spokane overwhelmingly approved a bond for \$64 million to further redevelop and improve the park, thereby yielding much of the greenspace and the various facilities that one encounters in Riverfront Park today. Additionally, adjacent to the park are numerous other key urban features—the River Park Square shopping mall, the Spokane Convention Center, a performing arts center, and various other facilities now crowd the park's periphery. Indeed, the park itself was

recently named by *National Geographic* as one of America's most beautiful urban parks. In summing up her experiences with the whole of this revitalization process, Margaret Shields put it thusly: "To this day whenever I am in the city park I am taken back to when the area was dark and then Expo appeared... [leaving] a beautiful park for all to enjoy" (Spokesman-Review 2014).

Our engagement with the space corroborated aspects of the park's broader reputation. Over multiple visits conducted at different times of the day, we noted the continually busy pedestrian use of the park. Our observations suggested a diversity of constituents—tourists were visiting the park as a destination in-and-of-itself; groups of school-age children and their chaperones made use of various park facilities; office workers on lunch break took advantage of the food trucks congregated in a designated area of the park (Figure 3); a variety of the city's inhabitants seemed to be passing through as part of their daily commute between the central business district and the primarily

residential district located on the north side of the river bifurcating the city; some used the park for jogging and other sorts of exercise; homeless Americans drifted through the park or napped in the shade available here and there on the islands. In our observations, none of these particular constituencies seemed to dominate the public spaces of the park. We were also attuned to some of the efforts to attract and organize this diversity of users. In the park's Welcome Center, the board of official events mentioned a wedding photo session, a family reunion, a birthday party, a fun run, the scheduled period for the aforementioned food trucks, a yoga session, an upcoming outdoor movie night at the central pavilion, a children's daycare visit, and a forthcoming "Shakespeare in the park" event. Throughout our various times in the park, rangers, police, and various maintenance workers patrolled or moved about the public space, and security cameras were discretely trained on almost all spaces on the islands.



Figure 3. Food trucks are one of numerous activities that draw people to and through Riverside Park in Spokane, Washington. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2022.

Of the three parcels analyzed here, Riverfront Park was far and away the most bustling and socially electric space, and in comparison to the other parcels, aspects of its trajectory through the twentieth century seem exceptional. One obvious aspect of this exceptionality is the parcel's urban setting. As our brief description here makes clear, Riverfront Park is interwoven with the surrounding urban fabric of Spokane in highly functional ways, and the parcel seems to benefit from the dense population of the surrounding urban landscape. Another notable aspect of the urban parcel's trajectory is the quantity of capital devoted to its improvement and its ongoing operation. In part, at least, this investment is a result of the initial successes of the parcel's revitalization: the park was a popular enough feature of city that it readily attracted additional public investment a decade ago. Finally, a third notable feature of this parcel's experience in past decades concerns how interconnected the site is with the broader surrounding community. By its mere location, the park serves as a quotidian feature in many urban residents' daily lives. But offices and various park personnel also help organize and facilitate those connections to the community, and the public successes of the park have lodged it as a key and representative feature of the city's image.

The Satsop Nuclear Facility

In every era it seems that Americans have conceptualized their present as precariously balanced between the receding traditions of the past and an impending, uncertain future. But despite the recurring nature of such claims, the 1970s seem an exceptionally tumultuous decade for the United States. An active and ongoing war in Vietnam sprawled into the decade. For the first time in history, the president of the country resigned his office. The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) embargo raised the price of oil to unforeseen heights, placing the whole of the country under a new set of stresses. And the American public

grew increasingly conscious of the deleterious impact of the decade's status quo upon the planetary environment. At the outset of the decade, an expansion of the nation's capacity to generate nuclear power seemed like an ideal component of a partial solution to some of these challenges. In Washington State, these various energies culminated in a consortium of public power utilities' plan to build several new nuclear reactors in the state. These new reactors were not only envisioned as a means to address the state's rapid and ongoing economic growth, but were also in cadence with a national strategy that sought to reduce American dependence on the oil-producing countries of the Middle East and beyond. All of these forces coalesced in plans for Washington Nuclear Project (WNP) No. 3 and WNP No. 5, nuclear reactors to be built outside the small western Washington town of Elma.

Although construction and operating permits were first obtained in 1973, construction commenced nearly four years later, in 1977. The 600 acre parcel was surrounded by another 1,200 acres of forested terrain perched above the Chehalis River Valley. The \$4.1 billion budgeted for the project would eventually balloon to nearly \$25 billion. As a massive infrastructural project located in a rural Washington county, the construction process enveloped the nearby town for many years in the 1970s. With a population of about 2,200 at the time, residents recall well-paid construction jobs and plenty of overtime pay for anyone interested in work. In the ensuing years, that work would continue as the project began to falter and unravel: various stakeholders and bond investors began to equivocate, and in alignment with the growing national anxieties about the societal risks of nuclear power, the Seattle City Council voted to withdraw its commitments for investment in the project in 1976. Seattle would, instead, address the energy crisis through conservation efforts and other types of programs. Seattle councilman John Miller summarily encapsulated the decision to withdraw in two pithy sentences: "It costs too much. And we don't need it." Combined with

cost overruns and construction delays, the consortium of public power utilities eventually defaulted on the bonds funding the construction of both plants. Altogether, this was the largest bond default in America to that date, and construction efforts withered and then eventually ceased in the early 1980s.

The uncompleted facility lay dormant for much of that decade. In the years to come, however, local business leaders and county officials formulated a plan to redevelop the parcel into the rural county's premier business park. Located several miles outside the small community of Elma, the business park today possesses some 547,000 square feet of office, warehouse, and manufacturing space. Operating now as the Satsop Business Park, the parcel is owned by the Grays Harbor Public Development Authority, and is associated with the Port of Grays Harbor, which itself lies some 22 miles to the west. In its promotional materials, the business park boasts of "premier office space, manufacturing facilities for light and heavy industry, a four-lane highway to Interstate 5, nearby access to rail, deep-water shipping and air transport, and robust telecommunications, industrial water and electrical infrastructure." With a small on-site staff, the business park has attracted a handful of tenants to the sprawling rural campus. The most significant current tenant is an indoor cannabis-growing facility owned by Northwest Cannabis Solutions, the largest legal grower in the state of Washington. Other tenants include various logistics companies and a manufacturer that handcrafts Christmas wreaths. The site has also been used for training various rescue teams and military units, assorted crews of workers, and for a small constellation of educational concerns. The eerie, gargantuan cooling towers looming over the parcel have also been the locational backdrop for portions of several Hollywood movies. Although a taco truck evidently maintains an occasional presence at the business park, it was absent during our several visits, and there are no other commercial amenities present on the site.

The gargantuan cooling towers rise well above the evergreen canopy, and are hence visible from miles away (Figure 4). To access the site from Elma, one travels on a short drive through a verdant valley and then crosses a bridge over the Chehalis River. In our multiple visits, we encountered almost no other humans. Only the cannabis growing facility contained a parking lot peppered with vehicles, and activities there were entirely contained indoors, out of sight. As previously noted, the Satsop Business Park's management office housed several persons, and while various signs indicated businesses and activities purportedly resident in other parts of the parcel, we observed almost no other business activities during our visits. Indeed, our only interaction with tenants of the business park was limited to a solitary individual, working in logistics, who was monitoring a shipment of solar panels awaiting approval by U. S. Customs before it could proceed, by truck, to other regions of the continental United States. As the logistics officer noted, he had flown in from the East Coast to monitor and process the shipment. Much of the rest of the site was essentially mothballed—buildings and structures were behind chain fences, shuttered or otherwise boarded up. In other cases, buildings seem to have been previously bulldozed and leveled.

When comparing it to the other cases evaluated in this article, the parcel first carved from the woodland for the Satsop Nuclear Facility remains the most desolate and most inactive of the three. In part, this results from its geographic distance from the community of Elma, for beyond the towers themselves, the activities of the business park are truly out of sight for residents of the closest community, and are hence spatially distant from their everyday activities. But our interviews with residents suggested this separation runs even deeper: while some community members recollect the flurry of activity constructing the site nearly fifty years ago, the facility had no operational lifespan at all, and other than a few jobs for a few years in the period of its construction, the community



Figure 4. One of the cooling towers at the Satsop Business Park looms over the largely empty grounds of the large parcel. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2022.

established no durable ties to the parcel. The horizons of the business park are also clouded by a broader set of factors, for its location in a rural area of a mostly rural county means that few of the tenants envisioned for the Satsop Business Park actually exist. Additionally, the burdens of upkeep and maintenance—monies and energies just to maintain the vast infrastructure of the site as it is—are borne by a county with a relatively diminutive tax base. All of these various factors coalesce in the Satsop Business Park, and have shaped the parcel's trajectory over the past four decades.

Assessing Washington's Big Parcels

In Michel Foucault's boundlessly influential conceptualization, discourse was the term he used for the social system, ideological context, and institutional infrastructure in which meanings, truths, and knowledge were generated (Foucault 1972). In transposing that concept from its linguistic origins to the domain of urban planning, our conceptualization of an *urban spatial discourse*

seeks to direct attention from the results of urban planning—the big parcels considered in this article—to the broader social, institutional, and ideological context that called forth these sorts of spaces and normalized their production (Gardner 2013, n.d.). In our examination of the circumstances surrounding these particular big parcels' trajectory through history to the present, our concerns are directed at the Modernist urban spatial discourse that once produced them. In part, that interest results from the fact that so much of the contemporary built environment inherited from the past is a product of this Modernist era in urban planning, leaving us with the formidable task of attempting to revitalize these gargantuan sorts of urban spaces and structures (Dunham-Jones and Williamson 2011; van Ulzen et al. 2017). Moreover, it's uncertain that these gargantuan planned parcels have vanished with the end of the Modernist era. Instead, some have noted that big parcels and the grandiose ambitions that they embody seem to have persisted into the post-Modern era as well (Augé 2008; Easterling 2014; Buras 2019). This suggests that the lessons

learned from the analysis presented here might be more than retrospective in nature: some of the problems and challenges observed in the spaces produced in the Modernist era may have analogues in the sorts of spaces being designed and constructed by urban planners today as well.

One clear thread in our analysis of these three big parcels concerns the variable connections between these spaces and the communities that surrounded them (or with which they were otherwise associated). In the case of Spokane's Riverfront Park, the 1974 exposition itself, as well as the subsequent bond to revitalize the park, were both community-based efforts. In its current manifestation, Riverfront Park continues to actively seek and build those community interconnections. Atop of that, or perhaps because of it, the park has emerged as symbolically central to the identity of the city itself. While the Northern State Hospital parcel in Sedro-Woolley is far less bustling than the river islands in downtown Spokane, our analysis revealed that the social memory of the hospital, built upon its decades of operation, is clearly an important factor in the parcel's relative success in navigating the demands of the contemporary era. Conversely, the Satsop parcel is burdened by its disconnectedness: out of sight from the nearby town and highway, with no operational history and no meaningful social memory of the place tethering it to the nearby community, attempts to retrofit and revitalize the parcel have been difficult. This suggests that the social threads connecting these big parcels to the surrounding community clearly have some inherent value.

Social memory, and the broader community's investment in these parcels' future, is partially shaped by the population density of the regions surrounding these planned spaces. Two of the three parcels considered here were located in rural areas of the state, and while population density is obviously related to the capacity to successfully cultivate the social memory that might buoy their fates, the demographic density of the parcel's setting seems to play an even larger role in these parcels' trajectory through history

and into the contemporary era. The Spokane Expo site, for example, accrued substantial other benefits from its place at the heart of the city. It is for that reason, at least in part, that it drew vastly larger sums of capital investment for revitalization than the other parcels. And it's for that reason that it remains in active use by a constellation of different people moving about or visiting the city. Conversely, both the Sastop and Northern State Hospital parcels are located in rural areas. As a result, not only do these rural sites simply have less community with which they might be connected, but also a more diminished tax base from which monies might be accrued for capital investment. In summary, this suggests that prospects for the revitalization of urban parcels are, by nature, brighter than those located in more rural areas.

A third and final thread woven through the case studies examined here concerns the singular function around which these parcels were originally designed. This functional singularity was a hallmark of Modernist planning. As those underlying singular purposes collapsed or otherwise vanished—Expo 74 drew to its conclusion, Northern State Hospital shuttered after decades of operation, and the Satsop Nuclear Site financially collapsed before completion—the parcels remained challenged by the homogenous singularity of the purposes for which they were originally designed. In our small and non-representative sample, the big parcels that more successfully adjusted to the contemporary era are those that configured ways to diversify their uses and to expand the constituencies involved in their quotidian existence. For example, the Northern State Hospital parcel split in two, with portions now operating as a park, and the hospital grounds now leased to a small variety of different tenants. Similarly, the site of Expo 74 also diversified its functionality, and works daily to continue serving and accommodating a variety of different users. Satsop has been less successful in diversifying its functionality moving forward, and seems pinned in place by the singular purpose for which the site was once designed.

Conclusion

What all of this suggests is a set of recommendations and lessons that are, in some sense, already well-worn elements of our critical output. For example, in his magisterial critique of what he termed “authoritarian high modernism,” James Scott (1998:353) contended that better institutions and spaces should be “multifunctional, plastic, diverse, and adaptable,” the very antithesis of the grandiose results typical of Modernist planning. The expansive and purposeful singularity of the three parcels considered here is equally emblematic of this Modernist penchant, and those spaces’ current managers and owners struggle against the homogenous functionalities for which each was originally designed. And in the same decade that Scott was writing, architect Witold Rybczynski (1994) added that a site’s sense of place is, in reality, generated less by its design and its architecture, and more via the social events and the social life that takes place within it. Our analysis would seem to corroborate this sensibility, and like these intellectual forebears, we suggest the importance of a human-centered tenor to urban planning and to our ongoing attempts to revitalize the built landscape we’ve inherited from the past.

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