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Making A Middle Landscape

By: Peter G. Rowe

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This book is about the physical character of American suburban and ex-urban development that has occurred during the modern era. In essence, it is about the making of a middle landscape between city and countryside.

The orientation is threefold. The first concerns what has actually been built since about 1920, when relatively simple arrangements of land, buildings, and infrastructure swiftly became transformed into complex multiuse centers and heterogeneous living environments. The second probes behind these physical manifestations of the middle landscape to uncover mythic themes, root metaphors, and attitudes of mind that seem to be at play. In large measure, this is an attempt to describe and dissect the symbolic landscape and some of its important cultural artifacts. The third focus concerns the problem of finding an appropriate poetic for the middle landscape and, in short, of defining proper design principles for its making.

Part One examines the territorial transformations made as a consequence of suburban metropolitan expansion. At first, decentralization and deconcentration of population and land use were the trends, followed by reconcentration and specialization. The result was a sprawling metropolitan cultural and spatial mosaic.

Part One also deals with simultaneous changes that have occurred in the way in which we have perceived cities. Shunned at first for its monotony and conformity, being “suburban” for most Americans quickly took the place of being “urban.” In the process the historical rise of pluralism in society, whose beginnings coincided with early suburbanization in the nineteenth century, was more fully institutionalized and geographically inscribed on the metropolitan landscape. In short, “urbs et rus” gave way to “sub-urbs in rure.”

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