

Conservation and the Landscape Architect

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Conservation is a practice which has become one of the most severely criticized and abused in our present day life. Its true meaning and value as the solution for most of our economic ills is appreciated only by the smallest percentage of our population. Conservation, in the minds of many people, is merely a movement sponsored by a few sentimental-minded lovers of nature who are afraid the more practical-minded will use up all the earth's resources. To discuss the question of conservation with the average person is a most disheartening experience, for we are apt to discover that such a subject stimulates very little interest, in fact it gives rise to every evidence of boredom.

In the past, problems of the conservationist have been limited, unfortunately, to the setting aside for future generations of areas which are distinguished by some outstanding scenery or natural wonder. For instance, for many years after the establishment of Yellowstone Park in 1872 as a conservation act, the American people believed that such methods of setting aside regions of natural beauty were the sole concern of conservation groups. But as time went on the more thoughtful citizens realized that conservation was a much greater thing than the mere setting aside of remote beauty spots and certain freaks of nature. The tremendous growth of our cities with their constant demands for more and more raw materials, the keen competition to gain first place among the producers of these raw materials, and wasteful methods associated with this production added new problems for the consideration of farseeing men and women, and conservation groups again were the champions of the movement for the prevention of waste. And so it

has been that the battle between the uncontrolled and wasteful producer and the exponents of intelligent use of the earth's wealth has been waged. However, the issue is one which involves every American. The attitude which is disgracefully common in this country at the present time is that the question of providing natural resources for future generations is in the hands of the scientists and that when we run short of coal, of wood, of oil or the metallic ores science will come to the rescue and provide substitutes. The past has taught us a bitter lesson and scientists themselves assures us that not even with them are all things possible. Greed, selfishness, indifference towards waste and the shirking of stewardship as regards the resources of nature are among the greatest curses of the American people and the answers to most of our troubles. We can have little regard for the individual who says "this is a free country, I'll let the other fellow do as he pleases and I'll do as I please. And why should I concern myself about what might happen in a hundred years? Why borrow trouble? Then too, you know what they say about crossing bridges?"

"Originating in the spectacle of waste and defilement," says Lewis Mumford, "the conservation movement has tended to have a negative influence: it has sought to isolate wilderness areas from encroachment and it has endeavored to diminish waste and prevent damage."

Fortunately, this old conception of conservation has given place to a new, all-embracing opportunity for a higher plane of living in this present age and for great service to all future generations. This new conception is regional planning.

"Regional planning," Mr. Mumford continues, "is the conscious direction

and collective integration of all those activities which rest upon the use of the earth as site, as resource, as structure, as theatre."

He says, "the present task of regional planning is a more positive one: it seeks to bring the earth as a whole up to the highest pitch of perfection and appropriate use—not merely preserving the primeval, but extending the range of the garden, and introducing the deliberate culture of the landscape into every part of the open country."

Continuing, Mr. Mumford maintains, "the task of regional planning is to make the region ready to sustain the richest types of human culture and the fullest span of human life, offering a home to every type of character and disposition and human mood; creating and preserving objective fields of response to man's deeper subjective needs."

We see by Mr. Mumford's definition of the field of regional planning that the conservationist has widened his range of vision and taken upon himself a new responsibility far greater than was ever dreamed of at the turn of the century. We should begin to appreciate also that we do not "live by bread alone" and that most of our wealth cannot be computed in terms of the latest market values. The various phases of conservation have until very recently been carried on by purely independent groups, each interested in its own program, somewhat envious of prominence given any one of the other groups, and each restricted by the name under which it has worked. It is not necessary to mention here those groups which have been functioning so admirably in behalf of the preservation of certain natural resources for economical use. We are aware of the great contributions they have made. However, it is this more comprehensive work of regional planning as the embodiment of all phases

of conservation which should be our first concern.

To illustrate how extensive our problem of conservation has become, we may consider the regional planning aspects of our national highway systems. In the development and control of our roadsides, this problem has presented itself most forcibly to us.

The history of the development of roadways in this country is one marked by abrupt changes influenced by the various inventions for speeding up transportation. From the days of the trail and the horseback rider to the improved roadways with room for two stages to pass conveniently and with easy grades to facilitate the hauling of heavy loads there was a long slow transition. But at the beginning of the present century with the advent of "horseless" carriages a rapid change commenced and up to the present day the demand has been for roads which will permit us to travel at ever increasing speeds. To meet these demands, much of the natural beauty as well as the permanence of the roadways themselves and the adjacent natural resources of economic value have been sacrificed. Latest studies by various states have shown that a vast majority of our roadways are far from being efficient from the scientific point of view and that the road pavement itself plays a relatively small part in the efficient design. In road building, the shortest distance between two points isn't always the straight line in spite of the fact that the highway engineer reduces his cuts and increases his fills. Jac Gubbels has said most aptly, "The road is not the shortest for the engineer unless it is the most easily constructed, or for the highway department unless it is the most economical to build and maintain. It is not the shortest for the driver unless it is the safest, or for the passenger if it is not interesting."

The public demands of which we

have made a brief remark have manifested themselves first in a desire for greater speed and the solution seems (according to concrete results) to be in the reducing of grades, widening of the road pavement, clearing the entire right of way, and the elimination of curves. However, the recent experiments conducted by the Texas State Highway Commission have shown us that earlier figures regarding accidents compiled in Connecticut are not just the unusual but the typical conditions on all our highways. Whether we call it "road focus" or "carelessness" we know that more accidents occur on straightaways than on curves and that the "flight" line with reduced grades is not necessarily the safest. The public does demand speed but it demands speed only with the guarantee of safety and comfort.

But the question will be raised as to the use of our highways and as to whether we shall turn an ear in the direction of those idealists who visualize the scientifically efficient roadside. According to the Bureau of Public Roads more than half of all the travel on our highway system is by tourists and other motorists driving for pleasure and for the enjoyment of the landscape. It is this large group of citizens who seek the efficient roadside but who do not know how it may be brought about. They are conscious of the fact that fine pavements have been laid with every technical skill available, but the mere laying of the pavement and the provision of a smoothly graded shoulder and gutter have not satisfied their desire for something more enduring. In other words the cross sections of our roads are still incomplete. Our roads are efficient in most instances as far as the gutters to the extent that we are apt to erect imaginary fences at those limits and consider our work finished. To the remainder of the right of way we cast a hasty glance, perhaps pick up the rubbish which has accumulated,

and then breathe a prayer that nature will smile upon our work and cover the scarred landscape with her protective green mantle. But no such miracles reward us for our neglect of the roadside; rather, we are brought face to face with our error by not only being deprived of the rewards of nature but by witnessing the most ruthless destruction of our investment that nature could impose. Gubbels has pointed out most clearly in his recent treatise, "American Highways and Roadsides", that the incompleting highway is one of the greatest enemies of conservation and that even a completed highway is an obstruction laid through the landscape. The engineer cannot escape the forces of nature; he can only minimize them by conforming to the laws of the landscape. He must realize at the same time that it is sound economy to observe conservation policies and must demand that the right of way be developed as consistently and completely as the pavement itself.

During the last few years we have heard a great deal about "highway beautification," in fact the very combination of words has been used to the detriment of the well-intentioned advocates of the roadside garden. Roadside development as we are considering it here concerns the entire planning and construction of the roadway from the earliest conception of the project to the completed planting. According to the Joint Committee on Roadside Development of the American Association of State Highway Officials and the Highway Research Board, "Roadside development must conserve, enhance and effectively display the natural beauty of the landscape through which the highway passes as well as provide maximum safety, utility, economy and recreation facilities by means of proper location, design, construction and maintenance of the highway."

This statement by the Joint Commit-

tee is conclusive evidence that more and more recognition is being given to the value of collaboration of highway engineer and landscape architect. It is recognized that "what is planned well, looks well," that there must be beauty as well as utility if our investment is to pay the highest dividends. And it is the return on our investment which determines how successful we have been in combining this beauty and utility. The argument so commonly raised by so-called practical minds is that expenditures for wholly esthetic and recreational needs is like pouring water upon the sands of the desert—there seems to be nothing to show for it. However, we have learned from a few less practical minds that it isn't so far-fetched to pour water on the deserts after all. From what we have just considered as necessary for the protection of the highway investment we should be cheered to know that for a sum equivalent to the cost of one mile of improved highway more than thirty miles of improved highway plantings can be done. Moreover, there are definite financial returns from the increased valuations of property along the improved right of way. From studies made recently in the Union County Park System of New Jersey, it was found that over a seventeen year period, increased property values on areas adjacent to the county park lands increased between 250 and 630 per cent. According to W. R. Tracy, Engineer and Secretary of the Park Commission, "A comparative survey of the Union County Park System of all properties adjoining the 4,282 acres of county park lands would probably show that revenues on increased assessed valuations directly traceable to the development of the various parks more than pay for all the carrying charges on this five million dollar investment in recreation and beauty." The findings of Elizabeth and of Union County are not unusual. We see evidences in our own cities of simi-

lar increased valuations due entirely to the improvement of adjacent areas as beauty spots for various forms of recreation. The effect of well-designed roadsides on surrounding property values is comparable to that brought about by any other attractive outdoor areas and it becomes the duty of each highway commission as agents of the people to create every possible opportunity for increasing these land values.

How are we then to foster this new attitude of conserving natural beauty through regional planning? How are we to go about this new job of cutting maintenance costs through the consistent completion of the cross section? How may we as highway commissioners, highway engineers, landscape architects or laymen in the field of conservation—how may we aid in bringing about this improved condition?

In general, people are keenly appreciative of beauty and the destruction of recognized scenic features immediately gives rise to violent opposition on their part. Most people may not be conscious of the fact that attractive surroundings are as essential to their well-being as recreational activity, food, and clothing, but they are early to register praise and gratitude for beauty created for their benefit. Robert Moses of New York City, in commenting on the appreciation of the public, said recently, "Mean parks make mean people who are moved to trample, disfigure and destroy things which are ugly, inadequate and contemptible to begin with. People, generally, respect and care for good things and resent what is cheap, inadequate and shoddy. You can expect cooperation from the public in the care of parks and recreation grounds only if you give them the best; that is, if you give them something which is obviously suitable, adequate, durable, and perhaps a little imposing."

Having studied the reactions of peo-

ple who have accustomed themselves to surroundings of ugliness, squalor, destruction and misery, and compared them with the reactions to surroundings of orderliness, beauty, efficiency, and joyousness, we are impressed with the importance of perception in cultivating a truly valuable character. The cult of perception is essential to every person who desires to understand the processes working about him, those opposing forces upon which all life is based, forces building up and tearing down. The practice of taking time for reflection and meditation has become a lost art, so that many sources of enjoyment are not open except to the man who will take the time for thought and consideration. Therefore, it becomes the obligation of each American to not only rekindle those fires of perception within himself but to prove by his outward acts that those fires actually burn.

There remains yet a problem which prevents this great program from being carried out in this country. It is a human problem and one which is as old as the races of mankind, namely the recognition of the true importance of human resources. The foregoing discussion has shown clearly, I believe, that the conservation of beauty is an important function of government, that the preservation of beauty is essential for the general welfare of the American people and that it is economy to plan on a large scale, keeping always in mind maximum utility with regard for beauty. In the words of Wilbur Simonson of the Bureau of Public Roads, "Fundamentally, roadside improvement is a problem of appearances in which beauty and ugliness are analyzed and separated." This undeniably stamps it as a fine art as well as an engineering consideration. It is significant to note that in the U. S. Civil Service Examination for "Conservationist" held in April, 1935, for the Forest Ser-

vice the applicants who were found ineligible were inadequately prepared in the principles of Landscape Architecture. A further need for the trained planner was evidenced by the examinations for the various grades of Landscape Architect held by the Civil Service Commission in 1937. Most eastern states and some western states now have well established landscape departments with professionally trained men working in collaboration with highway engineers and architects in the interest of scientifically efficient roadside developments. It is acknowledged by the foremost highway designers that more desirable results would be obtained in the various states if the individual district offices had their own properly qualified landscape architects who have not only had training and experience in engineering but also in the designing of public areas for maximum use and beauty. A few additional dollars spent for proper planning in the office means conservation of our natural resources, maximum use of all developed lands, increased land valuations, reduced construction and maintenance costs, and considerably more opportunities for improving the general character of man's environment.

Finally, as we accept this challenge to plan consistently, broadly, and intelligently, let us not lose sight of our sense of values to the extent that we concern ourselves only with the pressure of today's needs. It is well for us to remember always the timely wisdom of Roberts Mann that "these things of nature that remain and are the only permanent, enduring things in a world of discorded change: the trees and the mountains and the prairie and the desert that have seen other civilizations rise to their peaks and fall to die, may hold in their beauty and their silence the deciding factors in the very existence of our democracy."