

Free Lunch America

By Charles Buki

Americans know their landscape. Our collective memory knows that there is a McDonald's on the highway on the way to work where you can get an Egg McMuffin. We know that the airport now has a Victoria's Secret in case you absolutely, positively have to have an extra pair of panties on your way to a business meeting in Tulsa.

We know which food courts in which malls sell hot dogs and which ones sell crab cakes.

Once framed by an understanding of time, distance, climate and culture, the American geographic memory today is organized by the nearness of Wal-Mart and the convenience of 7-Eleven. It is shaped by the utopian joke we call modernism where the last laugh is on us. And where moral relativism reduces the pursuit of excellence to such an abstract debate that outrage directed at strip malls is criticized because of putative aesthetic elitism.

The Atlanta-Constitution might as well be the Denver Post. USA Today, CNN, Hertz and Holiday Inn have brought us the news of the day to our bed of the day to make certain we are never so much in a place as passing through it. As if in grand self mockery the missing corner bakery has now been reincarnated as The Corner Bakery, a chimera of locality masquerading as authenticity, a sort of planner's wolf in sheep's clothing.

Not only do we know our landscape, we calibrate it. We know that a burger at McDonald's is about a buck. That a gallon of gas is a little more. We gauge experience not according to climate and which vegetables are in season. But upon whether or not it is easy to replicate the salad we enjoyed at TGIFriday's in the mall in Tyson's Corner Virginia last week with the one now being served up in the Dallas Fort Worth Airport.

We measure what its like to be in Richmond, Virginia not by how southern a city it is, but on whether or not the city is prosperous enough to attract a Nordstrom. The price of Chicken McNuggets and the mandate to take our children to Disneyworld flow from our desire and willingness to live in a place called Shady Acres, which, incidentally, has no hope of shade for the

next 30 years as all the trees were bull-dozed to make way for the townhomes.

On top of measuring it, we talk about our landscape. Conventioneers in hotel elevators talk about the traffic getting in from the airport.

As if to prove Mark Twain right, rednecks with money talk about congestion pretending they have no part in it even as they elect pro-growth nuts to their state legislatures. In the glass elevators of another Hyatt Regency, they get excited to check in, shower and dress and visit Morton's steakhouse three blocks away. Nevermind that it is the same Morton's they dined at in Charlotte a month prior. We complain about the traffic as we purchase a third car and wonder why it takes so long to run errands on Saturdays.

So anemic has what passes for an American culture become that locally-owned bookstores now print postcards of their stores for tourists to send home, as if to say "look, I'm in a real place." Starved as we are for place and authenticity, it comes as no surprise that Charleston, South Carolina and the French Quarter and Georgetown and San Francisco have become little more than stage sets. Tourists from Oak Grove and Seaside and Spring Meadows and a thousand other developers' wet dreams flock to see what real places look like, what it feels like to walk to dinner or to a movie or a friend's house. On the way home in their minivans they talk about where they've just been as they doubtless consume a bag of whoppers while merging onto the interstate.

We write about this landscape. Parts of *this* essay have been written in the Atlanta Hilton. And the Albuquerque Hyatt Regency. And in the Burger King at the Denver airport. My mother asked me recently where I was headed to next, and I replied, "to Albuquerque." "Albuquerque?" she asked, "have you been there before? What's it like?" "Well, mom, Albuquerque is like Atlanta with sand." But for the roosters in low income neighborhoods three blocks from downtown, Albuquerque is so ununique that the only way you would not think you were in San Jose or Charlotte is the fact that those others places are just as common and deceiving.

A great book is waiting to be written about our landscape as we start the 21st century. A sort of travel companion to the route 1 corridors and Restons and everything that the National Trust will declare protected kitch in thirty years. Precisely how would one differentiate Raleigh from Greensboro, anyway?

Because we measure it and talk about it and write about it, we know the direction our landscape is heading. We know that America has long been slouching towards indistinguishability. We know all too well that authenticity has been sacrificed at the altar of efficiency. We have conveyor-belted the building of the homes we live in, the architecture of our museums, the experience of taking our children to a neighborhood restaurant. On the cusp of achieving true coast-to-coast placelessness one need not even visit New Orleans to find a creole restaurant or blackened redfish. San Francisco sourdough? Go to the Au Bon Pain in the mall.

The advent of the internet is not the beginning of virtual life, it is merely a more efficient delivery vehicle for the kind of placelessness hatched in a country that invented the free lunch even as it was electing an actor to be president who ran on a platform proclaiming there was no such thing as a free lunch. Our geography of nowhere has become so virtual that what we now have is a landscape of anywhere. Dairy Queen might as well be Burger King. Home Depot might as well be Target. Sears might as well be city hall, and amazon.com the community library.

Is all this worth the price? Is the five dollar lunch at Subway so important that the derascination of America's landscape into elixirs of ADM corporate farming, Monsanto pesticides, Kaufman and Broad subdivisions and ATMs worth it? Is the savings on a book at Borders worth the loss of the local independent bookseller? Is the convenience of another mall dressed up to be like Main Street worth the loss of Main Street?

Long after the Home Depot or the Target or the Corn Dog King has exhausted the building it is in, people are left behind with human needs that are more than the sum of fried chicken for dinner from KFC, lunch from Wendy's, and videos from Blockbuster. People, after all, when they no longer are satisfied with the status quo, seek to leave behind something larger than themselves.

And if the physical domain in which they live amounts only to a collection of parking lots and feeder ramps and connectors and Pizza Huts and internet chat rooms, the act itself of congregating becomes confined to spaces not like those found alongside Elliot Bay Books in Seattle but instead in between the new townhome development, the cows it borders, and the asphalt playground in front of OfficeMax. Civic behavior after all, requires a public place in which to bring together behaviors and ideas that result in a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

When all of our space is dedicated only to commerce for its own sake, three vital ingredients to a healthy society are sacrificed. The first is time. The second is aesthetics. The third is community, that rather elusive cocktail of civic virtue and public accountability that comes from having enough time to count the blessings of long term relationships forged from common interest on one hand and the aesthetics that result when people dedicate themselves to something more than themselves on the other.

For community is, at the end of the day, about the work of balancing the short and long term, the work of harmonizing one's individual needs which are always about what is best for me now, with those of who will come after you. Authenticity therefore, derives not from the design of the space alone, though that is important. It comes from that combination of human aspiration to be memorable and useful, welcoming, and celebratory.

When the best we have to say for ourselves is that our landscape is being transformed into casinos and Opreylands on the periphery and Blade Runner ghettos in the core, it is hard to believe that we show evidence of understanding the nature of time and distance and climate and culture. When Historic Boston becomes a tourist attraction only after it has become theater in the form of another Rouse development, the aesthetic foundation of virtue is as banal as the set for Truman Burbank's ostensible life.

Respect for the land is the way a society shows it has the capacity to love. By honoring climate and distance, humans make room for grace in their settlements. Kurt Vonnegut once remarked that if aliens visited and they wished to see the promise of mankind he would take them to Prague. Americans must do more than merely hope that if we are visited we have made the effort to make cherishable places here, too. For whatever else love may be, it is not virtual. And however else it may be possible to settle, time may only be honored if what I get is worth the price you pay.