

Cities ~~180~~ Spring 2009

# Outside Lies Magic

Regaining History  
and Awareness in  
Everyday Places

John R. Stilgoe



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One

## *Beginnings*

GET OUT NOW. Not just outside, but beyond the trap of the programmed electronic age so gently closing around so many people at the end of our century. Go outside, move deliberately, then relax, slow down, look around. Do not jog. Do not run. Forget about blood pressure and arthritis, cardiovascular rejuvenation and weight reduction. Instead pay attention to everything that abuts the rural road, the city street, the suburban boulevard. Walk. Stroll. Saunter. Ride a bike, and coast along a lot. Explore.

Abandon, even momentarily, the sleek modern technology that consumes so much time and money now, and seek out the resting place of a technology almost forgotten. Go outside and walk a bit, long

enough to forget programming, long enough to take in and record new surroundings.

Flex the mind, a little at first, then a lot. Savor something special. Enjoy the best-kept secret around—the ordinary, everyday landscape that rewards any explorer, that touches any explorer with magic.

The whole concatenation of wild and artificial things, the natural ecosystem as modified by people over the centuries, the built environment layered over layers, the eerie mix of sounds and smells and glimpses neither natural nor crafted—all of it is free for the taking, for the taking in. Take it, take it in, take in more every weekend, every day, and quickly it becomes the theater that intrigues, relaxes, fascinates, seduces, and above all expands any mind focused on it. Outside lies utterly ordinary space open to any casual explorer willing to find the extraordinary. Outside lies unprogrammed awareness that at times becomes directed serendipity. Outside lies magic.

MORE THAN TWENTY years ago, I began teaching the art of exploration at Harvard University, and I have been at it ever since. My courses and the books I have written focus on particular subjects—the creation of a national landscape as the treasure common

to all citizens, the seacoast built environment, the suburban landscape after 1820, the ways modernization reshapes traditional spaces, among others—but the real focus of all my teaching is the necessity to get out and look around, to see acutely, to notice, to make connections.

Late in the 1980s I stopped distributing schedules of lectures. On the first day of class I introduce each course, show slides that outline the subject matter, hand out a reading list and examination schedule, and speak a bit about the sequence of topics. But I refuse to provide a schedule of topics. Undergraduate and graduate students alike love schedules, love knowing the order of subjects and the satisfaction of ticking off one line after another, class after class, week after week. Confronted by a professor who explains that schedules produce a desire, sometimes an obsession, to “get through the material,” they grow uneasy. They like to get through the material. They like knowing the halfway point, the near end. I assure them that examinations will occur on given dates, that the term paper is due on the day I announce on the course information sheet, but then I explain that the lack of a topic schedule encourages all of us to explore a bit, to answer questions that arise in class or office hours, to follow leads we discover while studying something else. Each of the courses, I ex-

plain patiently, really concerns exploration, and exploration happens best by accident, by letting way lead on to way, not by following a schedule down a track.

My students resist the lack of topic structure because they are the children of structured learning and structured entertainment. Over and over I explain that if they are afraid of a course on exploring, they may never have the confidence to go exploring on their own. I encourage them to take a chance, and many do. My courses range in size from ten students around a seminar table to fifty in a traditional classroom, and I get to know my students. Now, more than twenty years after teaching my first course, I find myself knowing a great number of alumni. They tell me that I teach something of enduring value, not a mass of facts and figures, but a technique that produces surprise and delight, that enlivens otherwise dull days, that frees them from the ordinariness of so much learning. Day after day their postcards and letters, and now faxes and E-mail messages, arrive and sometimes I find their discoveries—and the ways they made their discoveries—so intriguing and insightful that I begin my classes by reading a line or two, then asking my students to comment.

My students often stare at me in amazement. They ask what kind of former students I have. Are

they reliable or slightly odd? One has just noticed escape hatches in the floors of inter-city buses and inquired about their relation to escape hatches in the roofs of new school buses. Another has reported a clutch of Virginia-Kentucky barns in an Idaho valley and wonders if the structures suggest a migration pattern. A third has found New York City limestone facades eroding and is trying to see if limestone erodes faster on the shady sides of streets. A fourth has noticed that playground equipment has changed rapidly in the past decade and wonders if children miss galvanized-steel jungle gyms. Another has been trying to learn why some restaurants attract men and women in certain professions and repel others, and another (from the same class years ago) has found a pattern in coffee shop location. Yet another reports that he can separate eastbound and westbound passengers at O'Hare Airport by the colors of their raincoats. I look at my students and encourage their comments, suggesting that they consider the alumni remarks in terms of safety legislation or wagon-train routing or regional differences in clothing styles. By the middle of the term, my students respond, having gotten over their fear of subjects about which little is written.

Learning to look around sparks curiosity, encourages serendipity. Amazing connections get made that way; questions are raised—and sometimes an-

swered—that would never be otherwise. Any explorer sees things that reward not just a bit of scrutiny but a bit of thought, sometimes a lot of thought over years. Put the things in spatial context or arrange them in time, and they acquire value immediately. Moreover, even the most ordinary of things help make sense of others, even of great historical movements. Noticing dates on cast-iron storm-drain grates and fire hydrants introduces something of the shift of iron-founding from Worcester and Pittsburgh south to Chattanooga and Birmingham. The storm-drain grate and the fire hydrant are touchable, direct links with larger concepts, portals into the past of industrialization.

Exploring as I teach it depends heavily on understanding the pasts that swirl around any explorer of ordinary landscape. Unlike so many historians entranced by great political, economic, and social movements, I emphasize that the built environment is a sort of palimpsest, a document in which one layer of writing has been scraped off, and another one applied. An acute, mindful explorer who holds up the palimpsest to the light sees something of the earlier message, and a careful, confident explorer of the built environment soon sees all sorts of traces of past generations. Students with no particular interest in schoolroom history involving presidential elections,

treaties, and wars often awaken to the richness of spatial or visual history, simply because objects and even landscapes from the past have shaped their lives and shape them still.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, experts advised men to have their kitchens painted apple-green. The experts believed that apple-green quieted nervous people, and especially wives beginning to think of suffrage, of careers beyond the home. Today the explorer of color schemes finds in old houses and apartments the apple-green paint still gracing the inside of the cabinet under the kitchen sink, and the hallways of old police stations and insane asylums. But did apple-green once cover the walls of urban schoolrooms? The explorer who starts to wonder at paint schemes in apartments, houses, and schoolrooms may wonder at the pastels that cover the walls of police stations today and the bold, primary colors everywhere in public elementary schools but absent from private ones. A college student only slightly intrigued by period color schemes but awakened to the art of exploration has a subject and skill that reward countless hours spent outdoors, in cabs approaching airline terminals, and in art museums. History is on the wall, but only those willing to look up from newspaper or laptop computer glimpse it and ponder.

A lot more is on the wall, too, however, and exploring ordinary landscape sharpens the appreciation and understanding of subjects from art to physics. No longer am I surprised when my students tell me that what they learned in my courses paid immediate dividends in others. Exploring a painting independently, not as a mere follower of some art critic, reveals details and patterns critics have missed, as one of my seacoast-environment-seminar students told me when she began studying the trees in the coastal-zone paintings of Rembrandt. And exploring the context in which a physics experiment occurs, really seeing it in detail and realizing that something is happening to the measuring device as well as to the material being charged with electrons, leads to discovery that impresses the physics professor, as a student in my suburbs seminar related to me before lapsing into scientific jargon I scarcely followed. When I hear such reports, I wonder if more students would do better in elementary and high school if teachers taught more about individual exploration of subjects and less about sliding smoothly along observational ruts.

Exploration is a liberal art, because it is an art that liberates, that frees, that opens away from narrowness. And it is fun.

Ordinary exploration begins in casual indirection,

in the juiciest sort of indecision, in deliberate, then routine fits of absence of mind. Follow the sidewalk, follow the street, turn right or left as the wind and sunlight or driving rain suggest. Walk three quarters of the way around the block, then strike out on a vector, a more or less straight line toward nothing in particular, follow the downgrade or the newer pavement, head for the shadow of trees ahead, strike off toward the sound of the belfry clock, follow the scent of the bakery back door, drift downhill toward the river. Bicycle to the store, then ride down the alley toward the railroad tracks, bump across the uneven bricks by the loading dock grown up in thistle and chicory, pedal harder uphill toward the Victorian houses converted into funeral homes, make a quick circuit of the school yard, coast downhill following the sinuous curves of asphalt covering the newly laid sewer line, tail the city bus a mile or two, swoop through a multilevel parking garage, glide past the firehouse back door, slow down and catch your reflection in plate-glass windows.

Why not explore by car? Automobile exploring insulates the motorist from every sort of nuance. The car moves too fast for its driver to notice much, and when it slows, it obstructs then jams traffic. Rarely can it safely pull over to the side of the road, onto the shoulder legally intended to receive it but nowadays

harboring weed-masked ditches, broken glass, nails, tangled barbed wire, smashed shopping carts. Always its engine drowns out whispers; always its windows, its air-conditioning shut out odors. Always it bulks too large to turn easily into eight-foot-wide roads left from wagon days. Even when it is equipped with four-wheel-drive, trees and gates and mud and great rocks herd it back onto pavement, onto rutted roads meandering between obstacles. But worst of all for the explorer, the car attracts notice. Exploring requires the cloak of invisibility bicyclists and walkers quickly take for granted.

Bicycling and walking offer unique entry into exploration itself. Landscape, the built environment, ordinary space that surrounds the adult explorer, is something not *meant* to be interpreted, to be read, to be understood. It is neither a museum gallery nor a television show. Unlike almost everything else to which adults turn their attention, the concatenation of natural and built form surrounding the explorer is fundamentally mysterious and often maddeningly complex. Exploring it first awakens the dormant resiliency of youth, the easy willingness to admit to making a wrong turn and going back a block, the comfortable understanding that some explorations take more than an afternoon, the certain knowledge that lots of things in the wide world just down the

street make no immediate sense. But exploring not only awakens attitudes and skills made dormant by programmed education, jobs, and the hectic dash from dry cleaner to grocery store to dentist. It sharpens the skills and makes explorers realize that all the skills acquired in the probing and poking at ordinary space, everything from noticing nuances in house paint to seeing great geographical patterns from a hilltop almost no one bothers to climb, are cross-training for dealing with the vicissitudes of life. Exploring ordinary landscape sharpens all the skills of exploration.

Explorers quickly learn that exploring means sharpening all the senses, especially sight. Seeing intently means scrutinizing, staring, narrowing the eyes, even putting one's hand across the forehead to shade the eyes in one of the oldest of human gestures. The hand over the eyes shields them from some sideways, incident light, and cupping the hands around the eyes works even better. Spruce, pine, hemlock, and other coniferous trees become suddenly greener since the eyes see their colors as saturated, free of the blanching caused by dispersed light. And since the human eye evolved to see saturated color, cupping the hands around the eye makes possible more precise scrutinizing of even distant things, for the shielded eyes pierce the light haze that afflicts

most places nowadays and reveal distant slopes not so much as brownish or gray, but darker blue, and the trees blue-green. Any explorer learning to look soon discovers the astounding interplay of light, shadow, and color, a gorgeous interplay that never ceases to amaze.

Until the turn of the century, noticing the interplay of light and dark and the myriad effects of interacting color across the landscape meant engaging in the study of *chromatics*, sometimes called *gentleman's chromatics* or *ladies' chromatics* by professional artists, but often called *meteorology* by well-educated people who knew that weather included far more than rain or wind. A stunning collection of "atmospheric effects," everything from mirages to double rainbows to over-the-horizon glimpses called *looming*, figured in the education of well-to-do children lucky enough to get beyond the one-room schoolhouse and prepare themselves for analyzing art, especially painting. Meteorology, art history, and geography combined to explain the wealth of meaning implicit in phrases like "the light of Tuscany" or the heritage implicit in colors like raw umber or chartreuse. So long vanished that even historians of the visual retrieve its fragments with difficulty, education in visual acuity explains both the origins of careful tourism and the care with which many people not only designed and built

houses and gardens but supported efforts to beautify cities, suburbs, and even villages. Educated people looked acutely and valued landscapes and paintings and even furniture that rewarded scrutiny.

Visual education suffered first from the burgeoning of newspapers and magazines and dime-novels, all of which deflected interest toward typeset knowledge, and from lithography and other inexpensive methods of reproducing images, especially advertisements. Around the turn of the century, the proliferation of inexpensive black-and-white photography, then the spread of cinema houses, further deflected interest from exploring ordinary outdoor surroundings. The 1930s introduction of color photography for amateurs and cinematographers alike skewed attention further, but by then physics professors intrigued with Einstein's theories had catapulted college students, and high school students preparing for college, across Newtonian physics, especially Newtonian optics, to a science consisting largely of equations and interminable problem sets. By 1940, the old relation of visual acuity, physics, and analysis of art lay shattered, its only schoolroom artifact being a few minutes of instruction with a glass prism, a prism making a rainbow of colors in which few students ever see indigo, let alone wonder why Newton saw the color made by a New World dye explorers found by accident. Only



now and then does someone rummaging among heirlooms notice that amateurs seem to have made much better photographs a century ago, that the faded images show an eerie attention to composition and chiaroscuro, certainly an attention lacking in most contemporary snapshots and homemade videotapes. Going for a walk became progressively less interesting even to educated people in the 1930s and 1940s, simply because even educated people knew less and less about the mysteries of light, shadow, and color that cloak and accentuate ordinary landscape.

Nowadays almost no one who walks under deciduous trees notices that all the spots of sunlight on the walkway, whatever their different sizes, are the same shape. The elliptical shape indicates something to anyone who notices and then thinks for a few minutes, who explores where others walk or trudge or scurry. The elliptical shape means simply that the sun is not a point source of light, that it fills a very large part of the sky indeed.

As education in visual acuity diminished, then essentially ended except perhaps for lessons in the appreciation of art and a handful of elementary lessons in oil painting, seeing became less and less rewarding, and interpreting poetry and travel narratives written in earlier eras became progressively more difficult. Smoke, for example, entranced generations of educated men and women, simply because it exer-

cised their eyes and their minds. Ordinary wood smoke pouring from a chimney appears blue against a dark background, such as black shingles, but brownish yellow against a light one, such as a blue or overcast sky. Smoke particles disperse blue rays more than they do red and yellow ones, and when the smoke is against a light background, the viewer sees the smoke as brownish yellow because the blue rays have been scattered in all directions into the incident white light, leaving mostly blended red and yellow rays to reach the explorer.

Nowadays the explorer walking or bicycling in ordinary landscape may more easily watch the changing colors of smoke from truck and bus exhausts than from chimneys channeling wood smoke, but the explorer willing to risk a bit of rain can still study the amazing changes wrought by a few droplets of water. Tobacco smoke immediately exhaled from the mouth appears blue or brown, but smoke held in the mouth, then blown out in smoke rings perhaps, is always white. And just as the moisture in the mouth coats the sooty black particles of tobacco smoke, so mist, fog, and rain coat diesel exhaust, making it appear white.

Visibility mattered to earlier generations of educated adults, and to children learning to see acutely, so changes in weather mattered too. Prolonged periods of still air make for poor visibility simply because

vast amounts of dust sink down from upper altitudes and remain near the ground until rain or snow sinks them to the surface. Sunny, windy weather sweeps dust particles high into the atmosphere and lets explorers see miles farther than they would otherwise. Rain meant not only washed air, however, but puddles everywhere, especially in shady areas beneath trees, where explorers may venture as soon as the sun appears. Peering into one sort of puddle after another, the explorer can analyze the visual phenomena related to those made by cupping hands around eyes, learning that to look at the reflection of trees in dark puddles means seeing details in excruciating clarity. To look up at the trees means having one's fringe vision dazzled by the incident sunlight, but to look down into the puddle surrounded by dark earth means to see the reflection free of annoyance. Out for a walk after the rain means not only peering into one type of puddle after another, however, but seeing how clean air opens on all sorts of reflections.

Today explorers must teach themselves the lessons of visual acuity long absent from grammar schools and universities, and they can learn only by looking hard. Out for a walk, out for a bicycle ride, the explorer looks at a new-mowed lawn and realizes that the strips look different when viewed end-on. Where the lawn mower moved away from the explorer, the swaths look lighter in color, but where the

machine moved toward the explorer, the swaths look darker. The explorer eventually realizes, having stopped and scrutinized and thought, that the swaths that appear lighter do so because they reflect more light, and they reflect more light because the grass is laid down away from the explorer. Trespassing on the new-mowed lawn offers even more to ponder. At right angles, the swaths disappear completely, but from the middle of the lawn, as the explorer turns around, the light-dark relation reverses. And having noticed the light-dark relation, the explorer meandering through an ordinary suburban landscape begins to see the patterns in American lawn mowing, the lawns mowed in concentric squares, the lawns mowed diagonally to houses, the lawns that at first seem to contradict all the lessons of gentlemen's or ladies' chromatics, those lawns where the fertilizer spreader missed whole swaths. The explorer notices and ponders and notices, and even when the explorer cannot at first account for the interplay of light and shadow and color, say the bold, rich blue of the explorer's shadow when crossing the green lawn, at least the explorer has something to think about.

THIS IS A straightforward guidebook to exploring, but not a comprehensive study of any of the things mentioned in it. It suggests that a little acute observation

of ordinary things like power lines, railroad rights-of-way, post office equipment, back roads and shopping districts, alleys and the interstate highway system, fences and revitalized main streets, even motels and highway interchanges opens up larger issues that invigorate the mind, that entice understanding, that flex mental muscle, that fit the explorer for further exploring. It is a book about awareness in ordinary surroundings. It is a book about awareness that builds into mindfulness, into the enduring pleasures of noticing and thinking about what one notices.

I hope this book encourages each reader to widen his or her angle of vision, to step sideways and look at something seemingly familiar, to walk a few paces and see something utterly new.

I also hope this book makes each reader aware that his or her personal observations and encounters in the most ordinary of landscapes can and will raise questions and issues routinely avoided by programmed educational and entertainment authorities.

And I hope this book makes each reader aware that education and entertainment media teach nothing about being original, about being innovative, about being creative or inventive. How does one learn to be creative? How does one develop the ability to produce lots of new ideas, to respond to problems easily and energetically? I think the answers lie outdoors.

Exploration encourages creativity, serendipity, invention.

So read this book, then go.

Go without purpose.

Go for the going.

How to begin? As an introduction, as a straightforward guide into the art of walking or bicycling with eyes open, mind aware, body relaxed, following and noticing the skeleton framework of electric and other lines will do. After all, not long ago wise observers worried that the telegraph, telephone, and electric wires were the snare of modernism, a great net strung over the heads of the unwary, a web that snatched ideas and dreams and independence.