

Arcadia

I have been thinking of the Rocky Mountains where I have been living for over a decade, and this soggy mixture of earth, air and water that makes up southern Louisiana.

I have been thinking of these two places not only because I am most nearly experiencing them simultaneously - as can be provided by air travel, but because these two places present a dynamic study in the contrasts and overlaps between nature, culture, human behavior, perceptions, assumptions, preoccupations, occupations, faith, beliefs and myths...

The qualities of these two places always bring me back to thinking about the choices we make about where we live, and how we live in places. And how our intentions are shaped and modified by the places we live.

I don't often refer to HARD data, but....

MT/Rocky mountains 51/49

Montana 37/63 total acres: 93,000,000

Louisiana 11/89 total acres: 27,000,000

3 mil acres of coastal wetlands

rockefeller preserve: 76000 acres – est 1914

2,219,823 acres Yellowstone national park

Rockefllers deeded 33000 acres to Grand teton

Grand Teton National Park: (1929/1950) 310,000 total acres

Tonight I am going to try to knit together a loosely made fabric of my personal mythology, how I relate to the landscapes that I experience, and contemplate, and the belief that brings me to stand here in Louisiana today.

It seems to me that each of us serves a quest that is manifest from our myths, myths that provide a way for us to relate to the world around us.

The relationship we develop provides a “roadmap” for the decisions we make regarding our creative practice. As well as our lives.

Several years ago I was lecturing to members of the AIA in Oklahoma. The lecture focused on the qualities that define places – from natural to constructed. I was discussing the qualities of PEACE, BEAUTY, HUMILITY – that I believe can be manifest in the things we make,

At the end there was a q and a session. What I heard was not so much of a question, but more of a statement- that it was easy for me to show beautiful images of the Rocky Mountains and the places that are built there. But those were inspired by beautiful

places - how was someone to be inspired by the landscape of Oklahoma, A landscape that this audience member obviously believed had little or diminished environmental qualities. He also he missed the fact that the images I had shown were from all over the country. And Even some in Urban environments such as Boston,

From this experience, I was reminded that as a society we believe that some natural places are more beautiful than others, and conclude that those places that are more beautiful deserve protection and preservation.

while the places we value less for their beauty consequently become suppliers of resources to build our economic wealth.

We believe that we have organized the natural environment through this selection process. What is beautiful is set aside, what is not, is used.

This assumption is not wholly true. In fact it is mostly a myth that we accept to believe.

It is an inherited myth of explanation of how most of our public land was set aside for preservation. And , ultimately, this myth effects how most of us behave regarding our activities in the natural world.

The truth is, that ultimately we choose to "protect" environments in the US in direct relation to their difficulty to develop and USE.

As a society, and a government body, we overwhelming choose for our own short-sighted term / benefit, to use and develop the land, water and air (to almost complete exhaustion) which would otherwise exist as it has for millions of years, with minimal disturbance.

We agree to set aside places from our use only after we determine that there are little resources to USE. OR if as a people – we ban together to challenge the USE of all places for extractive practices....

The land that we have protected, is without a doubt stunningly beautiful and transfixing. And none of it would most likely be protected without the radical thinking and actions of those who recognized their inherent qualities of beauty.

I also believe that these difficult to develop places share another attribute.

A cultural overlay of the ancient Greek myth of Arcadia. Which helps to convince us of its Natural Beauty and experiential benefit.

As so many of our myths and truths about right and wrong, love, beauty and peace arose from the Greek mind, so did our understanding of and perceptions for landscapes, and how they provide for us **and** how we relate to them.

These cultural sensitivities are so imbedded within our civilization's cultural psyche that we do not recognize them as something external from our immediate life experiences.

The Ancient Greeks inhabited their landscape long before they were writing about it, before "history " and before myths were written down. Therefore, Arcadia is left with an obscured past: was it real or imagined?

Today, most historians recognize that Arcadia was a rugged landscape that lay beyond the reach of "civilizing" powers of the Classical Greek populous.

Not unlike our prairies before trains, or the Mississippi river before channels and barges, or the millions of acres of Utah before cars.

Arcadia is found within in the Pelopponise . It is a rugged mountainous area that was difficult to get to, difficult to live in , develop or cultivate. Because of the difficulty to move across it, or settle large populations in it the area remained wild, obscure and rural.

I became intrigued by the idea that a place we have never experienced could preoccupy our minds, without us always aware of the preoccupation.

Whether we realize it or not, Arcadia as mythical concept fills western civilization's imagination of wild and rural places.

Arcadia is the place of peacefulness and rural simplicity, An Area of mountainous forest, it is a place of living off the land but within the means provided. IT is simply-natural Beauty.

It is a landscape for protection, escape and projection. It is a place where we once lived before we were keeping track of time, counting days or money.

It was the land of the Greek goddess Artemis.

Pan- ALL things

Hermes – Mind/intellect

The Arcadian landscape also reminds us of the greek verb "arkein" to be strong, to endure, to be sufficient.

And its impersonal form/ *Arkein moi*, "its enough for me, I'm happy, content/

arcadia has been and continues to be the subject of myth, poetry, paintings, comings and goings, pilgrimages, and the search for a better life.

Arcadia became the place of fairy tales, it was simultaneously where purity and truth could be found on quests, it was also the place where we could be lost in the wilderness. A place where all knowing existed.

Arcadia jumps across language barriers, it spans time, it creates places. It becomes real and then recedes. It offers a way to imagine what has been, what could be, and what is.

Throughout our history we can recognize the contrast of idyllic arcadia to the civilized conditions of humankind.

We have inherited Arcadian ideals from the words of Homer, Virgil, Jefferson, Thoreau,

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The visual expression of Poussin, Thomas Cole, and even Cy Twombly.

In North America, the Arcadian myth survives in our minds and our perception of idyllic and awe inspiring landscapes

we have had handed down to us a cultural relationship between people and landscape, between wilderness and civilization – and we overlay the Arcadian identity over landscapes with similar visual qualities.

The first land in the US was set aside from full development in late 1800s. These places provided Stone, wood and grazing land to settlers as they expanded across the American prairie reaching to the West. Arcadian myth infiltrated the Western mind, becoming its ETHOS.

EVEN Before the American West was pioneered there was another vision documented, in another landscape of the Americas:

in 1524 the Italian navigator, Giovanni De Verrazzano, as a member of the French Expedition traveled up the eastern sea board from Virginia,. He witnessed. A wild and fertile land and he requested that the cartographers upon his schooner note the eastern seaboard we now know as the Chesapeake bay as Arcadia..

Over the years map makers who drew and redrew the map of north America as we expanded over it's waters, shores and land, slipped arcadia northward. And given that many map makers, were trained to draw and copy, were illiterate, they not only missed the value of the mythical reference of Arcadia to this land of paradise, they also missed the value in retaining all of the letters in words.

As Arcadia moved north along maps, it also was transformed in name, until. It arrived some years later and took hold along a coastal island and it's surrounds that was being

settled by a group of French immigrants. The name stuck, and retained its spelling over time as **Acadia**. The myth had only lost its "r".

As the French and the British squabbled over the land, the Acadians flourished. The population grew, and their self reliance and desire to live only within their means allowed them to retain their independence between the French and British.

Until 1762, when the British finally took control of the land the Acadians had settled. Their refusal to pledge allegiance to the British Crown resulted in their expulsion from these lands. The removal of the Acadians from what is now Nova Scotia remains one of the most dreadful upheavals of a peaceful people.

The Acadian's arrival to their new communities were preceded by the British slanders that they were weak and lazy, making it almost impossible for them to find work, or buy land.

Until their arrival to Louisiana Territory (1762-85)

The Acadian history may be a well worn past to most of you. But I think it is worth repeating as it relates to the evolution and endurance of the Acadian as well as their manner of settling South Louisiana.

Different from their namesake, Arcadia, the landscape in which the Acadians found themselves had long been seen as USEFUL by European explorers with the discovery of the Mississippi.

That provided not only a coastal condition, but also passage from North to South for trade. Long before there was an interest or vision of the need to set "places" aside from expansion and development. The environment in proximity to the Mississippi was settled, drained, cultivated and transformed from its inherent natural qualities to one that served those who lived upon it.

(Alaska Territory purchase 1867, Louisiana Purchase: 1803)
mouth of Mississippi 1682
New Orleans 1690-1700
Homestead Act 1862
Forest Service land 1891
Yellowstone National park 1872
GTeton 1929 (1950)

Arctic National Wildlife refuge - 1960
Rockefeller Preserve in 1914
Rockefeller Grand Teton 1950

By the time of the Early Industrial Period (1830-70) the industrial mind viewed land as the perfect venue for building an economy, and with a developing economy – potentially unlimited wealth.

The land of Louisiana – and especially that which was closest to waterways – was bought and modified- and exchanged for profit. It always had a use.

It never was thought of as useless. It was never seen as a wilderness or ARCADIA, as was so much of the West, and therefore, never had the opportunity to be set aside.

BY 1879-1899 the intellectual/emotional battle over **Alaska** was being waged. Looking for another revenue stream for Alaska besides extraction.

Late 1800s Muir was visiting Alaska – where he was so struck by the glaciers he believed they could form men as well as mountains.

Teddy Roosevelt fought hard to retain the Territory of Alaska “ to serve as a long-term salve to the inherent rottenness of industrialization/” Roosevelt believed in the symbolism of Alaska as well as the actuality of it....

The wetlands are not mountainous and rugged and therefore difficult to traverse, or difficult to USE, and in our imagination the wetlands of Southern Louisiana don't match the idyllic wild lands of Arcadian Myths seen in contrast to civilization.

The Wetlands do not match our INHERITED sense of a Beautiful Landscape.

150 YEARS after Roosevelt's battle to set aside Alaska everyone knows that the wetlands are in trouble that their life and health is faltering, that there are communities and jobs that depend on the survival.

But these call outs for considering and saving the wetlands is entrenched in the very industrial/capitalistic mindset that has brought us to where we are today.

What we forget to remember is despite our inherited myth of Arcadia - the Beauty of the Wetlands. We forget that the wetlands, like Yellowstone, Glacier, the wilderness in Alaska, the Boundary waters in Minnesota, should be protected because of their inherent qualities. Not simply because of their resources,

I say this because – overwhelmingly this issue is what is communicated to me. A way of life is disappearing.....

Perhaps we need to recognize that the Wetlands are ARCADIA, too.

There is a great lesson for us to learn when we think about Aldo Leopold's sentimental writings of the grassland prairie of Nebraska. A place that most of us will never visit.

Leopold, after exploring some of the most culturally significant and protected landscapes in North America: Without question, Arcadian visions. the highland deserts of New Mexico, the Rockies, Alaska and the Sierras in California, **still** valued the seemingly plain landscape of Nebraska. The Sandhills of this place were Leopold's Arcadia,

I believe – as Leopold did - That all natural landscapes are equal in their qualities and possess the ability to transfix, transform and open us up to experiencing a world that extends beyond our own preoccupations and concerns. that all landscapes hold inherent beauty. A quality that we respond to

The Ancient myth of Arcadia (when tied to a visual legacy) provides some of the first and still applied cultural patterns of Western Civilization. Inherited from a people who identified the natural qualities of their NATIVE experiences. We train our eye to look for these places. Not so we can protect them, but simply as away to tie us to our past, and to create connectivity in the world, to help us make sense of our world.

Perhaps another way to consider Arcadia is through the concept of – biophilia – our love of life – all that is alive and VITAL.

I think back to the dissatisfied person in Oklahoma who believed there was little or no beauty in the landscape of Oklahoma. Especially the grassland area around Oklahoma City. What I tried to point out to him was that the beauty – was there to experience – in the sunlight that came from the sky and passed through the long grass stems of the prairie, the blue of the sky as it met the horizon of the gently flowing topography, the birds, the light breeze in the air.....he was choosing NOT to recognize the beauty, he was choosing NOT to experience the place that is alive and vital - and value its inherent qualities.

The concern I have with the myth of Arcadia, is not that it encourages our perception of some natural places as beautiful, and therefore worth preserving – but when taken with the inherited visual legacy, we close off our perceptions from recognizing that the world as a whole is BEAUTIFUL and VITAL

What does this myth of Arcadia have to do with built environments?

The answer is so basic that we seem to step right over it –

Arcadia is an ancient myth of western society that we have used explicitly or implicitly for thousands of years to reflect upon how we understand the natural world, and our relationship to the natural world.

AND with the myth of Arcadia I am reminded that our relationship to the natural world is fundamental. This is something that ancient societies *KNEW* it was within them (they simply lived this life – imbedded in the landscape.

As landscape architects, architects and environmental designers....The outcome of our work – the materiality of it – makes explicit our relationship to the natural world. Our beliefs about how we exist in the world. What we value about nature and ourselves.

The relationship we have to the natural world is Therefore, the fundamental issue that relates everything we do as creators – every choice taken – is what is the belief that is held with respect to the relationship to the natural world?

What is your Myth? Your Arcadia? What is your touchstone for belonging to the world?

The place that grounds you, inspires you?