Urban Pastoral: Farms, Gardens, and Parkland in the City

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The American Myth of Nature

In the United States, the kinds of nature that we celebrate are wilderness and pastoral landscapes.

They are the foundation of the American myth of nature from which we assess the value of nature in America.
However, we are now predominately a country of urbanites who have only occasional contact with wilderness or pastoral nature.

In American cities, we perceive nature in the urban landscape filtered through a conceptual framework that prejudges its ecological and cultural value.

Our understanding of what constitutes “official” urban nature in cities is shaped by culturally dominant metaphors of nature.
Narrative of Redemptive Urban Nature
The Urban Wild and The Urban Pastoral

In America, we celebrate urban nature that is either deliberately cultivated pastoral “greenspace” like parks, gardens, and urban farms or formally protected as remnants of the “wild” native landscapes obliterated by the creation of the city in preserves, sanctuaries, refuges, and other “wildlands”.

[Images of urban nature features: East Urban Farm Tour, Austin Wildland Conservation Division, Nature Preserves]
American Narrative of Redemptive Urban Nature – The Urban Pastoral Myth

• The American narrative of redemptive urban nature emerged in the 19th century, and so it uses the Transcendentalist myth of nature in which nature is a tonic for body and spirit.

• Space for urban pastoral nature is created to provide recreation and “healthy, local” food for physical health and to allow contact with officially sanctioned nature for mental health.

• Tension between the Country and the City

• Tension between sentimental pastoral arcadia [escape from the urban] and rural agrarian life.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard
Pastoral Landscape with a Shepherd and Shepherdess at Rest 1761
The Iterative Natures - Classical Western Ideas of Nature

1. **First nature** - wilderness or pristine (untrammeled by humans)

   Wilderness is the realm of the gods or “primitive” humans

2. **Second nature** – pastoral arcadia – pastures, farms, settlements

3. **Third nature** – Renaissance formal gardens

   Jacopo Bonfadio wrote in 1541 that formal gardens make a “third nature, which I would not know how to name.”

The illustration shows a distant mountain (first nature) giving way to cultivated agricultural land (second nature) and then a formal garden (third nature).

Frontispiece to l'Abbé de Vallemont's *Curiositez de la nature et de l'art* (1705)
Humans and Wild Nature

Oh, how great and divinely limiting is the wisdom of walls. This Green Wall is, I think, the greatest invention ever conceived.

Man ceased to be a wild animal the day he built the first wall; Man ceased to be a wild man only on the day when the Green Wall was completed, when, by this wall we isolated our machine-like, perfect world from the irrational, ugly world of trees, birds, and beasts.

- Eugene Zamyatin, *We* (1921)
Pastoral Arcadia

Cicero *De natura deorum* (45BC)

We enjoy the fruits of the plains and of the mountains, the rivers and the lakes are ours, we sow corn, we plant trees, we fertilize the soil by irrigation, we confine the rivers and straighten or divert their courses.

In fine, by means of our hands we essay to create as it were a second world within the world of nature.
Virgil’s Classical Myth – The Aesthetic of Pastoral Arcadia

Virgil is credited in the *Eclogues* (40 BC) with establishing Arcadia as a poetic ideal that still resonates in Western literature and visual arts.

Fortunate old man, here you’ll find the cooling shade, among familiar streams and sacred springs. Here, as always, on your neighbor’s boundary, the hedge, its willow blossoms sipped by Hybla’s bees, will often lull you into sleep with the low buzzing: there, under the high cliff, the woodsman sings to the breeze: while the loud wood-pigeons, and the doves, your delight, will not cease their moaning from the tall elm.
The Garden
Harmony and Innocence
English Pastoral Poetry

Elizabethan Pastoral - Because the genre represents its subjects from the idealized perspectives of rural life, it gave writers who were critical of the more sophisticated manners of the city a chance to praise the virtues of simplicity and artlessness.

Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579)
Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (1590)

Christopher Marlowe, *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love* (1599)

Come live with me and be my Love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dale and field,
And all the craggy mountains yield.
There will we sit upon the rocks
And see the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers, to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.
William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

*Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595/96)

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows, Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows, Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine, With sweet musk roses, with eglantine. There sleeps Titania sometime of the night, Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight;

As You Like It (1599)

They say he is already in the Forest of Arden, and a many merry men with him; and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England. They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day, and fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world.

The Forest of Arden functions as another Arcadia. The name “Arden” combines Arcadia, the classical earthly paradise, with Eden, the Biblical paradise.
English Pastoral Poetry

Romantic Pastoral
John Clare 1793-1864
“the greatest labouring-class poet that England has ever produced”

*Pastoral Poesy*

True poesy is not in words,
But images that thoughts express,
By which the simplest hearts are stirred
To elevated happiness.
Mere books would be but useless things
Where none had taste or mind to read,
Like unknown lands where beauty springs
And none are there to heed.
But poesy is a language meet,
And fields are everyone's employ;
The wild flower 'neath the shepherd's feet
Looks up and gives him joy...

John Constable, *The Hay Wain* (1821)
The Romantic Re-invention of Nature
The Romantic Concept of Nature – the Sublime and the Search for the True Self

The Romantic period in English literature, begins in 1798, the year of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

For the Romantics, Nature was closer to a spiritual experience, a natural religion of the sublime, as opposed to traditional institutionalized religion.

Romantic "nature" is a vehicle for self-consciousness. The Romantics' preoccupation with natural phenomena amounts to a search for the true self, for one's real identity.

The Sublime

Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*

A presence that disturbs me with the joy Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime Of something far more deeply interfused, Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, And the round ocean and the living air, And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
19th Century Literary Re-invention of American Nature

American Transcendentalism


Nature is a source of sensations--healthy feelings.

It is therapy for a diseased, overcivilized heart.

Humans can discover emotional health in nature. Such health leads to moral and spiritual clarity.

Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854)

Nature is a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization.

i.e. the Town and the City
On the morning of July 17, 1844, Nathaniel Hawthorne sat down in the woods near Concord and filled eight pages of his notebook with his impressions of “...a shallow space scooped out of the woods, which surrounded it on all sides...a thriving field of Indian corn, now in its most perfect growth, and tasseled out, occupies nearly half of the hollow; and it is like the lap of bounteous Nature, filled with bread stuff...

But, hark! There is the whistle of the locomotive – the long shriek, harsh, above all other harshness, for the space of a mile cannot mollify it into harmony.

It tells a story of busy men, citizens, from the hot street, who have come to spend a day in a country village, men of business; in short of all unquietness; and no wonder that it gives such a startling shriek, since it brings the noisy world into the midst of our slumberous peace.
The Lackawanna Valley (1855) George Inness 1825 – 1894
I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work.
The Annihilation of Time and Space - The Railroad, The Country and The City

- The “De Witt Clinton” was the first American passenger-locomotive.
- It hauled its first train on August 9, 1831, over the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad.
- The trip between Albany and Schenectady, a distance of seventeen miles, was made in one hour and forty-five minutes.
- The maximum speed attained was thirty miles an hour. By 1850, 9,000 miles of railroad lines had been built.

“Hundreds and thousands, formerly obliged to live in the crowded streets of cities, now find themselves able to enjoy a country cottage, several miles distant - the old notions of time and space being half annihilated; and these suburban cottages enable the busy citizen to breathe freely, and keep alive his love for nature, till the time shall come when he shall have wrung out of the nervous hand of commerce enough means to enable him to realize his ideal of the “retired life” of an American landed proprietor.”

Andrew Jackson Downing “Hints to Rural Improvers” 1848
The American Pastoral Aesthetic – The Apostle of Taste
"There is a moral influence in a country home."
A. J. Downing 1815-1852

In 1841 his first book, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America*, was published to a great success; it was the first book of its kind published in the United States.

Editor of *The Horticulturist* magazine (1846–52)

Democracy of taste – Regardless of one’s wealth or social standing, American republicanism offers equal and unlimited access to intellectual and artistic growth and the development of good taste, all of which accompany moral improvement.
Landscape Gardening – A More Refined Kind of Nature

In the United States, nature and domestic life are better than society and the manners of towns. Hence all sensible men gladly escape, earlier or later, and partially or wholly, from the turmoil of the cities. Hence the dignity and value of country life is every day augmenting.

And hence the enjoyment of landscape or ornamental gardening – which, when in pure taste, may properly be called a more refined kind of nature, - is every day becoming more and more widely diffused.

Andrew Jackson Downing “Hints to Rural Improvers” 1848
The New York Park 1851 “banish the plague-spots of democracy”

“Thanking Mayor Kingsland most heartily for his proposed new park, the only objection we make to it is that it is too small. One hundred and sixty acres for a park for a city that will soon contain three-quarters of a million people? It is only a child’s playground...

Five hundred acres is the smallest area that should be reserved for the future wants of such a city, now, while it may be obtained...Plant spacious parks in your cities, and unloose their gates as wide as the gates of morning to the whole people.

As there are no dark places at noonday, so education and culture – the true sunshine of the soul – will banish the plague-spots of democracy.”
FIRST STUDY OF DESIGN FOR THE CENTRAL PARK.
From a Wood-cut made in 1859.
Calvert Vaux  1824 – 1895
Hired by A.J. Downing 1850

Warren House - Newburgh, NY
The Architect of Central Park

The Gothic Bridge

Bethesda Terrace and the Belvedere Castle

Bow Bridge
America’s First “Landscape Architect”
Frederick Law Olmsted 1822 – 1903
Frederick Law Olmsted “Scientific Farmer” 1840-1852

- Works on a farm then his father helps him buy a farm near New Haven, Connecticut in 1847
- Monthly magazine *The Cultivator* – Newburgh, NY – scientific farming
- 1847 new monthly magazine The Horticulturalist – Andrew Jackson Downing
- In 1850, Olmsted visited southern England and Wales for a month-long walking tour
- *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* (1852)
Olmsted the Journalist 1852-1857

Interested in the slave economy, he was commissioned by the New York Daily Times (now The New York Times) to embark on an extensive research journey through the American South and Texas from 1852 to 1857.

His dispatches to the Times were collected into three volumes
* A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States (1856),
* A Journey Through Texas (1857),
* A Journey in the Back Country in the Winter of 1853-4 (1860)

A one-volume abridgment, *The Cotton Kingdom* (1861)
1858

Frederick Law Olmsted

Calvert Vaux

First study of design for the Central Park.
From a woodcut made in 1858.
Vaux and Olmsted’s "Pastoral" Style – The Greensward Plan
New York City Central Park 1858-1873 (843 acres)

The Pastoral style was the basic mode of his park designs, which he intended to serve as the setting for "unconscious or indirect recreation."

The chief purpose of a park, he taught, was "an effect on the human organism by an action of what it presents to view, which action, like that of music, is of a kind that goes back of thought, and cannot be fully given the form of words."
In such designs there were broad spaces of greensward, broken occasionally by groves of trees. The boundary was indistinct, due to the "obscurity of detail further away" produced by the uneven line and intricate foliage of the trees on the edge of the open space.
In other parts the reflection of foliage by bodies of water introduced another element of intricacy and indistinctness.

The effect was reminiscent of parks on estates that Olmsted had seen in England, and it was the image of the rich turf of that country, which he described as "green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous," when he first saw it, that remained for him the model of the Pastoral style.
The "Pastoral" style

... and groves for a soothing, restorative atmosphere
Urban Pastoral Democracy – “banish the plague-spots of democracy”

Olmsted believed that the rural, picturesque landscape contrasted with and counteracted the confining and unhealthful conditions of the crowded urban environment and served to strengthen society by providing a place where all classes could mingle in contemplation and enjoyment of the pastoral experience.
America’s First Landscape Architect
Frederick Law Olmsted 1822 – 1903

Central Park
Prospect Park, Brooklyn
South Park, Chicago
Mount Royal Park, Montreal
U.S. Capitol Grounds, Washington
Back Bay Fens, Boston
Arnold Arboretum, Boston
World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago
National Zoological Park, Washington
Biltmore Estate, Asheville, NC
Park and parkway system in Buffalo
The first Yosemite Park Commission
Niagara Falls Park
Biltmore Estate, Asheville, North Carolina
Colleges and Universities – Stanford, Yale, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Bryn Mawr, Brown, Chicago, Williams, Johns Hopkins, Duke, Notre Dame
Narrative of Redemptive Urban Nature

The Urban Pastoral Landscapes

Should the forces which push men into the arms of ignorance, sin, and death, be allowed a free field in our cities or should there be parks and open spaces to redeem the city with all that mingling of the natural and the human which we call landscape?

Charles Elliot, Jr. 1891

Metropolitan Park System of Greater Boston

First Regional Park System – First Land Trust
The Arcadian Myth in Urban America
Back to Nature vs. Back to the Land

Americans turning “back to nature” rather than “back to the land” responded to a philosophy only faintly related to the pattern of thought...called “agrarianism.”

Simply put, this urban response valued nature’s spiritual impact above its economic importance; it might be called “Arcadian.”

If the Arcadian myth was not simply a reversion to Thomas Jefferson’s agrarianism, neither was it a revival of nineteenth century Transcendentalism...


Confident in their Romantic philosophy, men like Downing, Olmsted, and Eliot saw themselves as educators teaching with shovel and pen a new meaning for nature in urban society.
American Agrarianism and the City

Agrarianism refers to a social philosophy or political philosophy which values rural society as superior to urban society, the independent farmer as superior to the paid worker, and sees farming as a way of life that can shape the ideal social values.

It stresses the superiority of a simpler rural life as opposed to the complexity of city life, with its banks and factories.
The Founders and the American Garden

[Images of books and a house garden]
The Cultivation of American Nature
Jefferson and the American Agrarian Myth

“Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, & they are tied to their country & wedded to its liberty & interests by the most lasting bands.”
1785 Letter to John Jay

The yeoman farmer was portrayed as a self-reliant individual, the bedrock of democracy.

He owned a small farm and worked it with the help of his family and was seen as simple, honest, healthy because he lived close to nature.
Early American Pastoral Politics

Federalists vs. Republicans

Urban vs. Rural

- The Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, were in favor of a strong central government with most power in the hands the landed few, and looked to urban and industrial expansion.

- The Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson, believed in the primacy of local government and a mainly agrarian national economy, based on small independent farmers.

Jefferson’s Republicans favored the agrarian economy because farming was a “noble” profession as it kept people out of the corrupt cities and close to the soil and God.
MEANWHILE MY BEANS, the length of whose rows, added together, was seven miles already planted, were impatient to be hoed, for the earliest had grown considerably before the latest were in the ground; indeed they were not easily to be put off.

What was the meaning of this so steady and self-respecting, this small Herculean labor, I knew not. I came to love my rows, my beans, though so many more than I wanted. They attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antæus.

But why should I raise them? Only Heaven knows. This was my curious labor all summer — to make this portion of the earth's surface, which had yielded only cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort, and the like, before, sweet wild fruits and pleasant flowers, produce instead this pulse.
Agricultural Knowledge

I was determined to know beans. When they were growing, I used to hoe from five o'clock in the morning till noon, and commonly spent the rest of the day about other affairs. Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds — it will bear some iteration in the account, for there was no little iteration in the labor — disturbing their delicate organizations so ruthlessly, and making such invidious distinctions with his hoe, levelling whole ranks of one species, and sedulously cultivating another.

Wild and Domesticated Connected

We are wont to forget that the sun looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction. They all reflect and absorb his rays alike, and the former make but a small part of the glorious picture which he beholds in his daily course. In his view the earth is all equally cultivated like a garden.
Making Pastoral Arcadia
19th Century Agricultural Utopian Communities
Post Civil War American Agrarianism

National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry founded 1867

The Grange, officially referred to as The National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, is a fraternal organization in the United States that encourages families to band together to promote the economic and political well-being of the community and agriculture.

It stresses the superiority of a simpler rural life as opposed to the complexity of city life, with its banks and factories.
Pastoral Rebellion 1879 – 1920s

Henry George 1838-1897

The Progressive Era and The Rural Populist Revolt

An economic depression between 1893 and 1897 caused poverty and unemployment.
Urban Back to Land Movement – Urban Populism and the Labor Movement
Bolton Hall 1854 – 1938

1908 published *A Little Land and A Living*
1908 established the Vacant Lot Gardening Association in New York City

Urban Agrarian “Little plots, well-tilled”
– “any dunce can raise a crop of onions on an acre of land”

- Potato Patches 1890-1930
- Depression Relief Gardens 1929-1939

Many farmers disliked the welfare garden program, thinking that it maintained the economic depression by adding to the overproduction already taking place
Social Crisis and American back-to-the-land movements

Tension between sentimental pastoral arcadia [escape from the urban and technology] and real rural pastoral life of farming for a living

1935

1970
Social Crisis - War and Patriotic Agrarianism

World War 1 - US National War Garden Commission 1917 Liberty Gardens

Boston Commons 1918
Chicago 1918

New York - Bryant Park 1918
World War 2 – Victory Gardens

• At their peak there were more than 20,000,000 Victory Gardens planted across the United States.

• By 1944 Victory Gardens were responsible for producing 40% of all vegetables grown in the United States. More than one million tons of vegetables were grown in Victory Gardens during the war.

• People with no yards planted small Victory Gardens in window boxes and watered them through their windows. Some city dwellers who lived in tall apartment buildings planted rooftop gardens and the whole building pitched in and helped.
Tension between Country and City

Agrarianism vs. Urbanism
Back to Land vs. Back to Nature
Tension between the Country and the City
Urban Pastoral: Farms, Gardens, and Parkland in the City

Tension between sentimental pastoral arcadia [escape from the urban] and rural pastoral life of farming for a living

Parks and landscape/ornamental gardens aesthetic engagement

Urban gardens/farms for food production to improve the city challenge the aesthetic

Agrarianism vs. Urbanism
Back to Land vs. Back to Nature