The Theme of Cultural Landscape

The cultural landscape is the artificial landscape that cultural groups create in inhabiting the Earth. Cultures have shaped their own landscapes out of the raw materials provided by the Earth. Every inhabited area has a cultural landscape, fashioned from the natural landscape, and each uniquely reflects the culture that created it. Landscape mirrors culture, and the cultural geographers can learn much about a group of people by carefully observing the landscape. Indeed, so important is this visual record of cultures that some cultural geographers regard landscape study as the core of geographical concern, geography’s central interest.

Why is such importance attached to the cultural landscape? Perhaps part of the answer is that it visually reflects the most basic strivings of humankind: for shelter, food, clothing, and entertainment. Geography by definition deals with the Earth’s surface, and landscape constitutes that surface. The cultural landscape also reflects different attitudes concerning modification of the Earth by people. In addition, the landscape contains valuable evidence about the origin, spread and development of cultures, since it usually preserves relic forms of various types. It is partly this potential for interpretive analysis that most attracts the geographer to study the landscape. Properly studied, this visible evidence can teach the observer much about the aspects of culture that are invisible, about a past long forgotten by the present inhabitants, and about the choices made and changes wrought by a people.

The idea that cultural landscapes possess diagnostic interpretive potential was introduced into geography by German scholar August Meitzen. Although we may not notice in our daily lives, the cultural landscape constantly changes across both space and time. The unravelling of its mysteries has occupied the attention of many of the foremost cultural geographers. In the words of famous French cultural geographer, Paul Vidal de la Blache, “All humanized landscapes have cultural meaning, and it follows that one can read the landscape as we do book. The cultural landscape is our collective revealing autobiography, reflecting our tastes, values, aspirations, and fears in tangible forms”. Modern geographers agree. O.F.G. Sitwell and O.S.E. Bilash recently proposed that “the spatial organization of settlements and the architectural form of buildings and other structures can be interpreted as the expression of the values and beliefs of the people responsible for them”. That is , the landscape can serve as a means to study nonmaterial aspects of culture. Certain other geographers, particularly some of the humanists are content to study the cultural landscape for its intrinsic artistic value, to obtain highly subjective and personal messages from the textures, colours and forms of the build environment that help describe the essence of place.

The content of the cultural landscape is both varied and complex. Most geographical studies have focussed on three principal aspects of this landscape: Settlement patterns, land-division patterns, and architecture.

In the study of settlement patterns, cultural geographers describe and explain the spatial arrangement of buildings, roads, and other features that people construct while inhabiting an area.

Land-division patterns reveal the way people have divided the land for economic and social uses. Such patterns vary a great deal from place to place. They range from huge corporate-owned farming complexes to small family-operated farms composed of tens or even hundreds of separate tiny parcels of land; from the fenced, privately owned home lots of American suburbs to the city’s public squares. Perhaps the best way to glimpse settlement and land division pattern is through an airplane window. Looking down, you can see the multicoloured abstract patterns of planted fields, as vivid as any modern painting, and the regular checkerboard or chaotic tangle of urban streets.

Perhaps no other aspect of the human landscape is as readily visible from the ground level as the architectural style of a culture. This architecture provides a vivid record of the resident culture. For this reason, cultural geographers have traditionally devoted considerable attention to such structures. We can distinguish two basic types of architecture in cultural landscape. Folk architecture and professional architecture. Folk architecture includes all buildings erected without professional architectural help. The styles and methods used to build them are derived from the folk culture rather than rom drawing boards and schools of architecture. The resultant structures are monuments to traditional practices and skills. Folk houses are often faithful copies of dwellings built in the same style for perhaps thousands of years. The works of professional architects and draftsmen also reflect their culture, although on a different level of technology. The professionally designed skyscraper or the mass-produced mobile home is as revealing of the modern material culture and way of life as the farmer’s thatched hut is of culture where it is found.