Escape from the Landscape: Shaker Heights, Walden and Pirate’s Cove

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Last year’s Western Reserve Studies Symposium concentrated on Euclid Avenue and the ways in which that glorious street was a kind of metaphor for the heady optimism of nineteenth century Cleveland and the fruition of the vision which Moses Cleveland and the Connecticut Land Company had for northeastern Ohio. Euclid Avenue, its name commemorating the Greek geometer, was the appropriate manifestation of the imposition of rectilinear urban planning on the late Enlightenment landscape. Its position at the center of the city, its emphasis on urban values, its solid housing stock on a well-travelled thoroughfare suggested the centrality of the city in the thinking of our forebears in this area. Euclid Avenue, straight as a shot, linked Cleveland via the Buffalo Road with the East and would eventually continue its uninterrupted way, as Route 20, west to the Pacific.

But last year’s conference had a shadow over it; implicit in the proceedings was the realization that the glories of Euclid Avenue are no more. Its heyday, measured against the great avenues of the world, was brief, and though the street is still there, its function has been superseded by highway and freeway making possible nearly everyone’s avoiding even a glance at its miles of urban blight. There are many factors that led to the demise of Euclid Avenue in Cleveland, but I would like to suggest that the sequel to Millionaire’s Row provides interesting insights into changes in the American psyche that have remained important for us for more than a century.

The grid, superimposed on the landscape by the surveyors of the Connecticut Land Company, was the manifestation of eighteenth century ideas of neoclassical balance and symmetry. Kenneth T. Jackson in Crabgrass Frontier (N.Y., 1985) has pointed out that “the psychological significance of the clean, efficient, utilitarian grid went even deeper. The pervasive right-angled plot, which enabled such efficient speculative subdivision, and so limited the utility and beauty of the city, personified the antinaturalism that influenced nineteenth-century urban form” (74).

Even as Euclid Avenue was being densely built up in imitation of the great cities of Europe, other voices were being heard. The Romantics in literature and art were extolling the attractions of the rural environment where a healthier existence could be lived untouched by the encroachments of pollution and noise that were becoming more the norm for the city of the Industrial Revolution. The Hudson River painters in New York supplied Americans endless idealized landscapes into which they could flee the trials and stresses of ninetenth century life. Andrew Jackson Downing, an architect friend of the Hudson River painters, became the most ardent spokesman for abandoning the city for the countryside. He argued patriotically that “love of country is inseparably connected with love of home” in A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening (1841) and in The Architecture of Country Houses (1850) that if the house were placed in the countryside, “in the little world of the family home . . . truthfulness, beauty and order would have dominion.” Calvert Vaux felt that the American love of the countryside was intuitive: “It shows that there is an innate homage to the natural in
contradistinction to the artificial—a preference for the works of God to the works of man" (*Villas and Cottages*, 1857, 27). The transplanting of domestic housing for the great cities into the countryside has been fully examined by John Stilgoe in *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb 1820-1939* (New Haven, 1988) and Jackson’s aforementioned *Crabgrass Frontier*; for us, the question as we look at the landscape of the Western Reserve is what impact did borderlands have here?

Romantic notions of the landscape had assumed that rural places were marked by the curvilinear: winding lanes and randomness. I.T. Frary, writing about new Cleveland housing developments, especially the van Sweringens’ Shaker Heights, in an article in *Architectural Record* in April, 1913, echoed what most Romantic planners aspired to:

> The whole trend of city life at best is to mold us into uniform types, and the endless repetition of cast-in-a-mold streets and houses only emphasizes the tendency toward loss of individuality. Fortunately, however, there is every evidence of a strong and rapidly growing aversion to this sort of environment, and the suburban development of many of our large cities is showing most encouraging signs of progress along the lines of park rather than grid-iron planning. (371)

Implicit in the romantic mind was a return to village life, and the creation of a village within the city at Shaker Square only intensified the illusion that something new had been brought to housing. Villages in the Reserve had, of course, been as rigidly geometrical as any urban environment; John Stilgoe has pointed out that “by the 1860s the grid objectified national, not regional, order, and no one wondered at rural space marked by urban rectilinearity” (*Common Landscape of America*, [New Haven, 1982] 106-7). Despite the fact that the van Sweringens’ plan is actually only a modified grid plan, the establishment of park-like environs in the area became the dominant visual impression particularly because the main arteries followed the geological lay of the land.

It is actually only in the twentieth century that the Romantic ideal of housing development has come to the Reserve. Walden, in Aurora township, established in 1970, is, in fact, a random web of curving streets which starkly contrasts with the eighteenth century grid around it. The naming of the development, in particular, is meant to suggest New England—after all, a large number of Western Reserve place names are New England in origin. However, Walden unwittingly calls up Thoreau’s aggressively temporary housing beside a pond in Concord. Earlier place names on the Reserve had perpetuated the memory of communities people had come from, rather than an unpopulated woodlot.

My final example cheats just a bit. We all probably have a favorite housing development name, and mine is Pirate’s Cove. It is not—I confess—the name of a suburban development but only the name of a street in one of the most fanciful of all inland developments: “Aurora Shores.” Here, evocative nomenclature has run amok, giving such names to tortuously winding streets as Crownest Cove, Windjammer Trail, Spinnaker Run and Surfside Circle. It would be nice to see it as a tribute to the Reserve’s New England maritime roots, though it is more likely an attempt to exploit the same romantic impulse that originates with Andrew Jackson Downing; no matter where you are, you can be somewhere else.