

THE VIEW FROM VERMONT: TOURISM AND THE MAKING OF

an American Rural Landscape

by Blake Harrison,
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This book is an interesting, well-researched and clearly written work that has applicability beyond its “View from Vermont”. Indeed it is notably grounded in a New England context, yet the tourism insights and discussion may have relevance on a broader scale. Harrison suggests the book is used “to explore tourism’s influence on landscape and identity” (p. 21) and in this regard the strengths lie in the historical account of the role of planning legislation in tourism development. The contributions of tourism in altering not only the natural landscape, but in the social and cultural discourses that took place during the last century are considered.

Many of the stories are told using the negotiation of landscape and identity in the context of work-leisure relations. Harrison challenges current assumptions and identities of natural rural landscape and offers a “middle ground” alternative as the transition area where “we negotiate our place in the middle world” (p. 16). Photographs and quotes provide a “snapshot” of a picturesque Vermont, while the narrative enlightens the reader on the conditions and decisions consciously made to sculpt the landscape for this desired outcome. We are invited to think critically about the relationships and identities that have been forming in Vermont since the nineteenth century and the subsequent shaping and “re-working” of the rural landscape.

At the onset, the reader is offered a variety of theories to frame the stories that follow, from Richard Schein’s ideas on the role of cultural landscape, Mitchell’s offering of landscapes deliberate ‘masking’ of social, economic, and political complexities to Urry’s “Tourist Gaze”. Subsequent chapters set the stage and continue the historical account. An introduction to a landscape designed by two types of work, agriculture and industry, is offered alongside a discussion of nostalgia and progress. The difficulties Vermonters faced during the 1930’s as many farms failed and subsequently chose to abandon their land is well documented and sets the stage for the debate on the value of the summer home as a resettlement strategy. The stories found in these first few chapters do indeed call into question the role of the cultural landscape and offer “rural” almost as a contrived marketing ploy by the Vermont Bureau of Publicity and the Vermont Department of Conservation and Development.

Throughout the following chapters, the reader can’t help but focus on the marketing of Vermont that would, in today’s tourism development context, be considered targeting or

segmentation strategies. One such strategy seems to focus on blending the “wild” with the rural landscapes as the wilderness areas of the Green Mountains are described as “pure, timeless, peaceful, and uncontrived” (p. 115), yet “just as accessible to the visitor as the state’s rural valleys”; transportation and accessibility being the basic tenets of shaping the ideal rural identity of Vermont in chapter three.

“Creating a new seasonal cycle” aptly subtitles the chapter which focuses on literature published in the early 1900’s that contributed to the notion of Vermont being a year-round destination for tourists. Assisted by the development of the skiing niche, excitement is added to the offerings of “leisure-living communities”. In the “Balancing the Rural” chapter, Harrison illustrates how these broadened tourism markets to four seasons and skiing “reinforced the sense among many rural landowners that property was far more valuable for leisure than for farming” and thus continued to further shape the rural landscape.

On the whole, this book is well documented with a variety of literature from relevant books, letters, and newspaper articles to an examination of State level policy and advertising strategies. The *View from Vermont* will certainly interest readers in the history of rural landscapes, work-leisure relationships, and human-environmental interaction.