



# FROM ULURU TO COOPER'S PLACE: *Patterns in the Cultural Landscape*

by Anne Whiston Spirn

**L**andscape was the original dwelling; the human species evolved among plants and animals, under the sky, upon the earth, near water. More and more the landscape has become a place of our own making, whose form embodies both our history and our present.

From hunter-gatherers to agriculturalists to citizens of postindustrial society, social organization has grown increasingly complex, and this is reflected in the landscape, both built and "natural." The landscape changes continually, in response to successive technologies, values, and beliefs. Each transformation overlays remnants of older ways. Modern highways follow aboriginal tracks; modern cities lie atop ancient settlements; the distinctive mountain or river that forms a landmark for contemporary citizens was also a sign for the original inhabitants.

Despite differences in social structure and culture, however, our basic needs as organisms have not changed for millennia; as human beings we share physical, social, and spiritual needs that determine our fundamental processes of living. These processes give rise to universal patterns of habitation. The patterns emerge repeatedly, across cultures, in myth, religion, literature, art, and the forms of gardens and settlements. This essay explores several of these archetypal patterns as they are expressed in three distinctly different cultures, widely separated in space and time. The landscapes of Australia's aboriginal hunter-gatherers, of eighteenth-century English gentry, and of community gardeners in a North American inner city appear dissimilar, yet there are patterns common to all.

## Uluru

The heart of Australia is a vast, red desert thousands of miles across. To many who live in the cities and towns that hug Australia's coastline, the center is a threatening chaos. To the aborigines who dwell there, the center is highly ordered, a complex mosaic of sandhills, claypans, dry channels, rocky outcrops, and rockholes, each with a precise relationship to

water, plants, animals, and myth. The landscape is charged with meaning and rich in food.

Bands of aborigines wander not indiscriminately, but consciously, within a domain of water sources and sacred places along paths defined by inherited song. The songs describe the features of the land and how their form came to be, the result of actions of the ancestors who sang the world into being. The songs, and with them the right to use the paths, are passed from one generation to another. The continent of Australia is laced with a network of these ancient paths that are visible only to those who know the songs that describe the way, that tell of the relationships between rocks, water, animals, and humans, and that link the present with the formation of the world during the Dreamtime. The songs not only tell of pathfinding and movement across the land, but also guide the hunting and gathering of food. Everyday rituals of digging for bush potatoes and witchetty grubs, gathering the bush banana, or hunting wallaby recall the legends of origin.

Aboriginal bands are small, their "estates" of sufficient size to support the group with water and food. The boundaries of each band's domain are fuzzy, overlapping those of adjacent estates; contiguous bands are joined by the songs they share. The locations of paths and sacred places are more distinct. Trespass on a sacred site is forbidden except by those who keep the place and those permitted to accompany them. The penalty for such trespass was once death.

The aborigines' way of life persisted for thousands of years. While aboriginal groups near the coast of Australia have contended with white settlement for two centuries, it is only relatively recently that bands in the central desert have had to change their traditional lifestyle.

Ayers Rock, called Uluru by aborigines, rises out of the desert, an immense monolith marking the geographic center of Australia. The rock has long held great significance for aborigines and contains numerous sacred sites. It may be the oldest continuously revered place in the world. Although the first white



explorers reached Ayers Rock a century ago, local aborigines were able to continue their subsistence culture until the 1940s, when cattle stations began to encroach upon their foraging territory and water sources. Today, however, the rock is a symbol of the outback for all Australians and the destination for growing numbers of tourists.

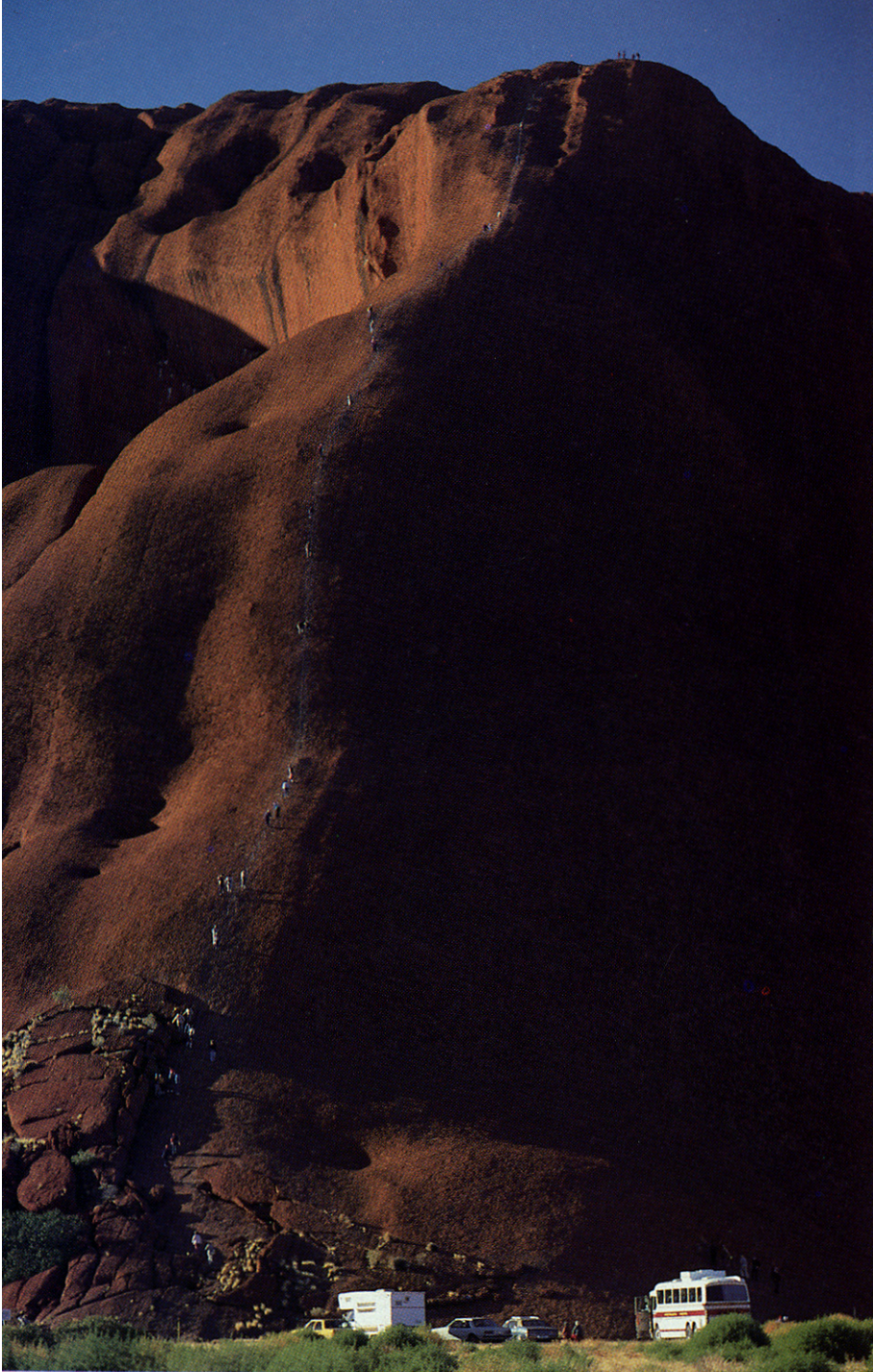
As tourism to the rock increased, many sacred sites were desecrated, often unintentionally, bringing anguish to their aboriginal “owners.” In 1979, these “traditional owners” sued the Australian government for rights to the land around Uluru. The case was settled in 1983, and the aboriginal owners now lease the land to the Australian government as a national park. Aboriginal advisors help guide its management. Sacred places are fenced off, out-of-bounds to tourists.

The rock, from afar, is smooth and rounded. As you approach, irregularities appear—deep furrows and crevices, pockmarks and jagged scars, and long, black streaks down the rock face. Out on the desert, the bright sun is hot, the air dry. Only when you arrive at the rock is the significance of the black streaks revealed. At the base of each streak is a magical place—cool, shady, and moist. For the black streak is a sign left by rainwater that streams off the rock, fills a pool below, and supports this oasis. Few tourists reach these places, and the stillness here is broken only by birdsong and rustling leaves.

Aboriginal rangers at Uluru have built a path for visitors, across the sand plain with its wildflowers and spinifex into a mulga grove and on to the base of Uluru. The rangers lead small groups along the path, telling stories of how their people gather spinifex and heat it to make glue, how they find food, and how the liru warrior ancestors—poisonous snakes—came across this plain and threw their spears at the Kuniya python ancestors, leaving the pocked marks on the rock that one can see today. Thus the tourist path recapitulates aspects of the dreaming tracks.

The English who originally colonized Australia were blind to the paths and signs that gave order to the aborigines’ landscape. To them it was a chaotic





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wilderness. The landscape introduced by these settlers (and still being built in the desert today) was a pastoral one with very different meanings. Its roots were in eighteenth-century English landscape gardens and Britain's own ancient precedents.

### Stourhead

From the time that Addison (1712) urged the English landowner to "make a pretty landskip of his own possessions," English gentry shaped the landscapes of their estates to express the integration of agriculture, art, property, power, and politics. The landscapes they created—groves of trees surrounded by rolling lawns clipped by grazing sheep—are recreations of pastoral landscapes described in ancient Roman poetry. These landscape gardens tell stories, stories that can be decoded only by those

who can read the signs.

Stourhead is such a landscape garden. The property lies on the rolling chalkland of southeast England. It was originally owned by Sir Joseph Stourton and bought in 1717 by Henry Hoare, a banker. To the modern visitor without an intimate familiarity with classical literature, Stourhead's landscape is merely picturesque, and the scattered buildings in a mixture of classical and gothic styles afford shelter from showers. To Hoare and his contemporaries, however, Stourhead was much more.

As you descend from the house down wooded slopes to the lake below, you enter a calm, carefully ordered world. There is only one path around the lake, which is now enclosed in woods, now open to a carefully framed, postcard-perfect view. As one walks the path, an allegory unfolds, linking ancient Rome with eighteenth-century England. Sculptures and buildings are located to contribute to the story, and Latin inscriptions yield clues to their meaning. Lines from Virgil's *Aeneid* refer to the founding of Rome, while others refer to Alfred, the first English king, or to Henry Hoare himself. The juxtaposition of classical and gothic styles similarly serves to extend the parallel between ancient Rome and England.

Stourhead is literally that, the head of the river Stour, whose source is the numerous springs within the valley. Monuments mark the springs: one is a gothic cross, moved from its original location near St. Peter's Church in Bristol; another spring wells up within a grotto, presided over by a sleeping nymph and a river god who points the way to the Pantheon. Historian Kenneth Woodbridge points out that the statue recalls the story from the *Aeneid* where "the God of the place, old Tiber himself," foretells the founding of Rome: "Here is your home assured and here for the Gods of Home is their sure place." The path leads on to a replica of the Pantheon, past a hermit's cave to the Temple of Apollo, across a Palladian bridge to the Temple of Flora. Unlike many other landowners, who moved entire villages to make way for their landscape gardens, Henry Hoare incorporated the village of Stourton into his arcadian composition. The church spire and cottages across the way compose a peaceful scene visible from the Pantheon across the lake.

The self-contained, idyllic world of Stourhead was a refuge for Hoare and his family from the political turmoil of London and Europe. The period from 1744–1785, during which Hoare built Stourhead, was a troubled time for England. Kings George I and II, both of German ancestry, embroiled England in a succession of wars with France. In 1762, Hoare constructed a tower to commemorate peace with France and the ascension of George III, "a truly English King." With this tower Hoare made explicit the connection between the values and fortunes of Rome and England, to which he had alluded more obliquely earlier. An inscription honors Alfred the Great: "The





Father of his People, the Founder of the English Monarchy and Liberty.” Thus does Hoare’s garden liken the role of Alfred in English history to that of Aeneas in Rome’s.

Unlike that of many eighteenth-century landowners, Hoare’s wealth derived from banking, not from the land itself. Still, the landscape he created at Stourhead stood for the man; it embodied, in his own words, “the fruits of industry and application to business and shows what great things can be done by it, the envy of the indolent who have no claim to temples, grottos, bridges, rocks, exotic pines and ice in summer.”

The English landscape style that swept England in the eighteenth century spread throughout the British Empire and beyond. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century garden suburbs in England and North America adopted this pastoral style, and so more recently have corporate office parks, sustaining the allusions to the power of property, the status of the owner, and the continuity of Western culture.

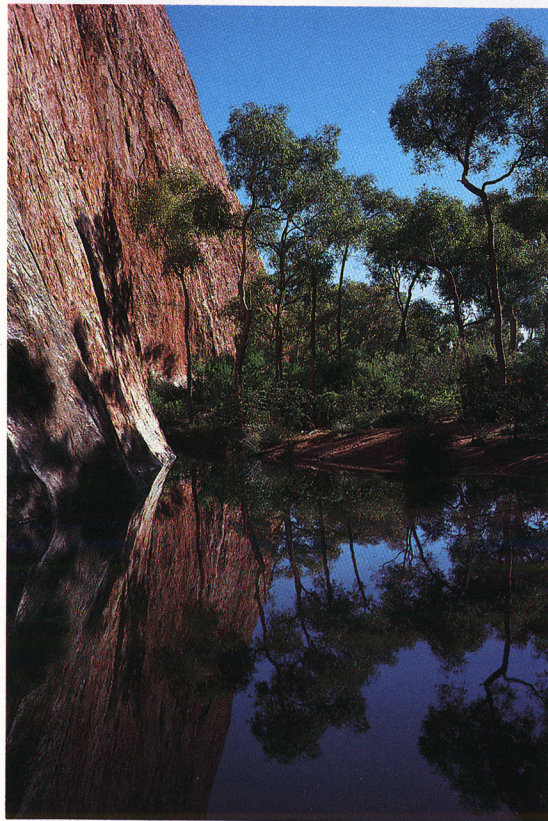
### Cooper’s Place

“Only land is power” reads a message scrawled across the wall of an abandoned building in Boston. This message would not have been lost on the eighteenth-century Englishman, nor is it lost upon residents of North American inner cities who transform vacant lots into community gardens, only to relinquish them several years later and see their place taken by parking lots, or, if land values rise, by buildings.

Forty people garden at Cooper’s Place, a community garden in the Roxbury section of Boston. Each gardener has his or her own plot and all tend a common sitting area, which they share with other neighbors. Fifteen years ago the garden was vacant land, composed of four separate house lots. The

property boundaries were invisible, and all traces of the four houses that once stood there were gone, save the stone retaining wall along the sidewalk, interrupted by steps that once led to front doors. The transformation from vacant lot to garden entailed the cooperative efforts of many organizations and individuals, including my landscape architecture students, who drew up alternative designs.

The plan for Cooper’s Place was simple: individual



*Overleaf top: Uluru (Ayers Rock) in Australia’s central desert, a site sacred to the aborigines, who read in its markings the history of the world and their ancestors in the Dreamtime.*

*Overleaf middle: The Pantheon at Stourhead, one of several allusions identifying the owner of the garden and his nation as the inheritor of ancient Rome.*

*Overleaf bottom: Cooper’s Place, a community garden in Boston, where archetypal patterns of territory bespeak a modern concern for place and group identity.*

*Opposite: Ayers Rock is part of a popular national park. The Australian government leases the land from the aborigines, who consider themselves the “traditional owners.”*

*Top: Trees at the base of Uluru provide shade from the desert sun. Black streaks on the rock face are signs of ephemeral waterfalls.*

*Bottom: At the base of each black streak is a pool and a shady oasis.*



*Below: A sleeping nymph within the grotto at Stourhead marks the source of a spring.*

*Opposite: The village of Stourton, its church, and a gothic cross, seen from within the garden, are signs of traditional English values.*

garden plots, a sitting area, and an orchard. Underlying this apparent simplicity, however, were people's complex feelings and sometimes conflicting ideas about the place and how they wanted to use it. My students listened carefully and then tried to design what they had heard the gardeners request.

They also groped to find an image for the place that would embody the values and aspirations of the gardeners. One student asked them what their favorite place in Boston was. The response was a surprising consensus: the Fenway Rose Garden. "Yes, the Fenway Rose Garden! That's why we want a rose garden here!" The Fenway Rose Garden, built in Boston's Fens in the 1930s, with its white arbors and gates, gravel paths, and multicolored roses, became the model for the new garden at Cooper's Place.

Today, walking up Linwood Avenue toward Cooper's Place, you can see the white arches and colored roses of the garden from a block away; closer, the scent of roses fills the air. You enter by going up the old stone steps through a white, rose-covered arbor. An unlocked gate leads into a formal, sitting garden, with a small panel of grass surrounded by a gravel path lined with flowerbeds. This sitting garden is an anteroom to the allotments beyond, reached

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through another arbored gate. In this larger domain are the individual plots, a common herb garden and sitting area in back for the gardeners, and alongside, an orchard and nursery. The two gates to the sitting garden are unlocked; the gate to the community garden beyond, however, is locked when no one is there gardening.

The harvest of fruits and vegetables at Cooper's Place is abundant, and gardeners share the surplus

with friends and neighbors. Many of the plants—sweet potatoes, peanuts, collards, and watermelons—reflect the gardeners' Southern origins; others, like lettuce, tomatoes, green beans, and summer squash, are grown widely in city and suburbs.

The sustenance provided by this land is spiritual as well as physical and social. One city gardener had told historian Sam Bass Warner, "I love to plant; I love to watch anything grow. I kneel down in that dirt and take up a handful of it. I say this is nature . . . this is God's thing and I enjoy it." Another gardener told of how the garden, calm and peaceful in the early morning, is a refuge where she goes to pray. Here, she says, she feels nearest to God.

### **Archetypal Patterns in the Cultural Landscape**

Despite differences of time, place, and culture, there are fundamental similarities in the cultural landscapes of Uluru, Stourhead, and Cooper's Place. The phenomenon of territory, for example, embodied in the use of land and the feeling of belonging to it, is common to all three; indeed, it is relevant not only to humans as individuals and communities, but also to plants and animals. While the need for territory may derive initially from the necessity to assure a source of sustenance, it is also important as a source of identity. It is difficult to maintain group identity without common territory, be it as small as a garden or a building.

The Australian aborigine *is* his territory; he belongs to his territory, which is not only the source of sustenance, but the repository of his history, a link to past and future generations. An aborigine's "country" consists of all those places that hold meaning for him, through inheritance and personal experience. Displace the aborigine from his country and you destroy an essential part of his identity. The property of the eighteenth-century English gentleman was the source of his power and his vote in Parliament; through the embellishment of the land as a pastoral landscape, he identified himself and his nation as the inheritor of Rome. His territory consisted of England as well as his own local property. The land of Cooper's Place was hard-won territory; held in common, it is a testimony to the achievement of group goals. Each gardener shares ownership through his or her use of the land; each plot is a source of physical and spiritual sustenance, and the plants that are grown there are a link to the past and the larger community. Essential to the definition of territory is the communication of its identity to others, an identity often expressed visually, through the character of boundaries and gates. The boundary at Cooper's Place—a chain-link fence four feet high—is a more unambiguous demarcation of territory than those at Stourhead and Uluru.

One can see through the fence at Cooper's Place and talk across it; along with the carefully tended roses, it signals that this area belongs to someone who cares for it, and vandals have left the garden



untouched, even as they have destroyed poorly maintained, public playgrounds nearby. The unlocked gate to the sitting area marks this as private property where others are welcome. The locked gate to the allotments beyond marks them as private, with entrance by invitation only.

The treatment of boundaries at Stourhead is complex. Within the valley, the boundaries are invisible since they lie beyond the enclosing hills or disguised behind dense planting. The valley becomes a world in itself. The inclusion of the village of Stourton within the view from the garden extends the "boundaries" of the estate beyond the territory it occupies. Thus does the larger world of the village and its inhabitants become part of the gentry's domain.

There are no walls, fences, or gates in aboriginal territory. The fuzzy, overlapping boundaries between adjacent "estates" reflect the aborigines' belief that many people together "hold" a country and that the land does not belong to them; rather, they belong to the land. Territory is defined by knowledge of the land and by knowing the stories each landmark embodies.

Dreaming paths, some hundreds of miles long, trace the ancestors' movements across the land and connect significant places and sacred sites within all the estates the path crosses. These paths also create territory: places linked by a dreaming path are "one country." The paths are thus not only for movement;

they also express relationships and joint responsibilities across multiple, contiguous estates.

Like the dreaming paths, the path at Stourhead links a series of landmarks or signs that together embody a narrative connecting the present with the past. The stories underlying some of the landmarks would have been well known to well-educated eighteenth-century visitors. Others, however, are more obscure; they have personal significance for the creator and assert his ownership.

The roses and white arbors at Cooper's Place have a shared meaning for the gardeners; they provide a link to another well-tended public space. The roses and arbors have come to stand not only for the garden, but as a landmark that defines the larger territory of the surrounding neighborhood.

There are other common patterns. Rock caves and water holes are refuges in the Australian desert, and sand dunes offer a prospect from which to spot the landmarks that give orientation. At Stourhead, the Pantheon and the Temple of Apollo provide both a prospect from which to view and reflect upon the landscape and its stories, and a refuge from showers. The benches set under the rose arbors at Cooper's Place are likewise both prospect and refuge. Seen as a whole, Stourhead and Cooper's Place are refuges from the world outside, and the central desert is now a refuge from Western culture for modern aborigines.



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## Cooper's Place

**C**ooper's Place is named after Ed Cooper, a neighbor, gardener, and activist whose leadership galvanized a group of residents to create a vision for the garden and to secure the resources required to make the land their own.

*In 1975, a group of local senior citizens began to transform the lot into a community garden. But they did not own the land. For six years the gardeners tended their plots, aware that the ultimate destiny of the land they tilled was beyond their control. In 1981, with the help of Boston Urban Gardeners, the Roxbury Action Program, and the Boston Natural Areas Fund, they acquired the land and in 1983 secured funds from the city for improvements. In 1984 my graduate students in landscape architecture developed a series of new designs for the garden, one of which was chosen by the gardeners for construction and built by local youth enrolled in a landscape training program.*

*Cooper's Place is now a local landmark. There have been weddings there and other celebrations. Completed in 1984, it has served as a kernel of neighborhood change. Five years ago, the apartment building next door and the two houses across the street were all vacant. These are now renovated, repainted, and repopulated.*

*Cooper's Place has been an inspiration to other groups for how they might accomplish similar goals in their own neighborhoods. The project created a reservoir of experience and expertise among community residents in terms of how to build things, how to maintain them, and how to get things done, and did the same among the trainees, who then went off to get jobs. The garden is a model for how to care for a place. How to cultivate not only the soil, but also relations with other people.—AWS*

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### The Origin of the Patterns

Territory, boundary, gateway, path, refuge, prospect, source, and sign—these are archetypal patterns. They exist across time, place, and culture. In Jung's sense, they are "archaic remnants . . . primordial images or motifs that can vary a great deal without losing their basic pattern."

These archetypal patterns can assume diverse forms. Gateway, for instance, denotes a threshold, a place of crossing over or through. A gateway may be a garden gate that opens and closes, a bridge that creates a point of entry into a city, or a harbor that affords access to some hinterland. A sign as a specific feature in the landscape may consist of words on a board, but Ayers Rock is also a sign, as are the roses at Cooper's Place and the monuments that mark the springs at Stourhead. Sign as an archetypal pattern denotes communication of meaning, of significance; as such, it encompasses all of these artifacts and more. Archetypal patterns like gateway, sign, path, refuge, or boundary serve similar purposes, whether at the scale of a garden, a building, a neighborhood, a city, a region, or a nation.

The origin of these patterns lies within the physical, social, and spiritual needs we share as humans and the cultural processes that have evolved to

fulfill them. One reason urban community gardens like Cooper's Place are so significant is that they provide the setting for most or all of these processes. Most obviously, Cooper's Place is a place for planting, growing, and harvesting food, but it is also the locus for many other life processes: for sharing and trading, for meeting and play, for making and building, for dreaming and worship. It is the scene of cooperation and conflict. The community garden is a microcosm of community.

Each feature of Cooper's Place encompasses one or more of these processes. The garden's boundary fence and gate, for example, define territory: they control movement and determine where one can enter or leave the garden. Their appearance also communicates how the gardeners feel about the community outside. The white arches that announce the entrance and the abundant roses that hang out over the sidewalk convey a welcome to the people outside. In addition, the wide, arched gateway gives a sense of refuge, even before you reach the larger refuge of the flower garden beyond. Layers of function, feeling, and meaning overlap in the garden.

### The Dilemma of Territory

Carefully tended urban community gardens stand in poignant contrast to abandoned, deteriorating land and buildings nearby, and raise difficult questions about the nature and responsibilities of ownership. To whom do such places "belong": to the owners, who live far away and have abandoned their property and left it to deteriorate, or to those who live nearby, who have adopted the place and cared for it?

To the Australian aborigine, the answer would be clear: one attains the "right" to a particular place through prolonged association and care, as well as through inheritance. This notion of rights to a place established through traditional use is also embodied in English law, which provided both for the enclosure and privatization of common lands and for the retention of common rights-of-way through that property as public territory. The location of the public footpaths, which still survive today, was determined by their sustained use by generations of countrymen.

Territory is an essential pattern that subsumes all the others. Seen at the larger scale, it is the domain within which we live our lives, the setting that must provide for all life's processes. At a smaller scale, it is the place where we belong and which we mark as our own.

The issue of territory is problematic in the twentieth century, which has seen widespread, large-scale migrations. In North America, urban redevelopment and gentrification have displaced low-income families from the neighborhoods in which they grew up, while shifts in industrial production, failing family farms, and the lure of corporate promotion have driven the middle classes from their hometowns. Across the globe, entire populations have traded traditional,





rural homelands for makeshift, squatter settlements at the edge of cities. This loss of territory has produced a larger loss for individuals and society.

### Patterns and Global Culture

We are all part of an increasingly global culture. New urban and suburban landscapes around the world express this culture through their growing sameness. An architecture of alienation dominates many of our cities and suburbs and gives rise to an increasing concern for place and placelessness.

Yet global culture need not eradicate local culture, nor need we surrender an appreciation for the global context, essential today for human survival. We need a sense both of commonality and of differentiation; we need to feel an identity with humanity and also a sense of belonging to a particular culture and place. Our habitats should express both, and the archetypal patterns of the cultural landscape provide a means to this end. They encompass basic life situations and constitute a human heritage with which to assert our commonality. They are continually embroidered upon by every culture, giving rise to forms that express that culture's distinctive qualities. The specific features of the cultural landscape that have evolved in a particular place thus differentiate the local culture even as they connect it, through universal patterns, to the larger world.

Path, boundary, sign, refuge—archetypal patterns enhance how we experience and “read” the landscape, and how we design it; they help us assess how well the landscapes we make satisfy our fundamental physical, social, and spiritual needs. They link the everyday with high art, the ancient with the contemporary and the future, the scale of the garden with the scale of the nation, the secular with the sacred, and join humanity across cultures. ●

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### Recommended Reading:

*To Dwell is to Garden*, Sam Bass Warner (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986).

*The Stourhead Landscape*, Kenneth Woodbridge (The National Trust, 1986).

*Uluru: An Aboriginal History of Ayers Rock* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986).

This essay is drawn from a book in progress on a language of landscape, derived from the archetypal patterns described here as well as from those of the “natural” landscape. Work on the landscape of Australia was made possible by the Ethel Chettle Visiting Fellowship to the University of Sydney in 1988 and a trip across Australia as a guest of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. Charlotte Kahn introduced the author to the concept of the community garden as a microcosm of community, and a grant from the Pew Charitable Trust has supported the continuation of this study.

*Above left: The vacant lot prior to construction of Cooper's Place.*

*Above: Ed Cooper at the gate to the garden named after him. The steps indicate where houses once stood.*