



Making a Middle Landscape

Peter G. Rowe

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Today's suburban metropolitan development of single-family homes, shopping centers, corporate offices, and roadway systems constitutes what Peter Rowe calls a "middle landscape" between the city and the countryside. While others have written about this phenomenon from the point of view of sociology or cultural geography, Rowe looks closely at suburban America in terms of design and physical planning. He builds a case for a new way of seeing and building suburbia, complete with theoretical underpinnings and a basis for design.

The directions Rowe pursues are threefold: what has actually been built since 1920, as simple arrangements of land, buildings, and infrastructure have been transformed into complex multiuse centers; the mythic themes, metaphors, and attitudes driving the production of important cultural artifacts like the home and the workplace; and the definition of design principles for this new landscape.

Rowe looks first at how suburban expansion has altered the land, at the new spatiocultural mosaic that has emerged and taken the place of the traditional city. He then examines four cultural artifacts - the house and its garden; the retail realm of roadside franchises and commercial strips, shopping villages and malls; the modern workplace of office parks and corporate estates; and the roadway that has become an essential link to all of these. Running throughout, he notes, is a story of technical planning and mass production where, paradoxically, rational excesses are often cloaked in romantic imagery. He concludes by proposing - and illustrating with numerous examples - a symbolic construct of "modern pastoralism" that juxtaposes the idea of arcadian simplicity and value against the modern technical temperament.

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