

# Reading the American Landscape

**History 615, section 5. George Mason University. Spring 2007**

Thursday, 7:20 – 10 pm. Krug Hall 19

Professor Zachary M. Schrag

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 3-5 pm, and by appointment. No office hours on March 29.

Course website: <http://readingthelandscape.pbwiki.com>

Course discussion board: <http://schrage.s4.bizhat.com>

General advice: <http://www.schrage.info/teaching>

This graduate reading seminar will explore the ways that historians and other scholars have studied America’s built environment to understand the nation. It will emphasize the variety of methodologies used to explore the American landscape: urban history, architectural history, environmental history, cultural geography, and historic preservation prominent among them. Books will cover topics ranging from the colonial period to the late twentieth century. Each student will also visit one museum or historic site, chosen to fit her interests and schedule.

## Administrative information

All assignments are governed by the George Mason University **honor code**, online at <http://www.gmu.edu/departments/unilife/honorcode.html>. You are expected to work independently and to acknowledge all sources, including assigned texts and materials found online. Gordon Harvey’s *Writing with Sources* should answer most questions about **citation**, but ask me if you need clarification. In general, any sentence in your work that can be traced to a single sentence in someone else’s work should bear a footnote. Any collaboration, such as consultation with the Writing Center, should also be acknowledged. Violations of academic integrity will be reported to the administration and may result in grade penalties, including failure of the course. I reserve the right to submit your drafts and papers to the **turnitin.com** database.

In case of **inclement weather**, please call the main switchboard at 703-993-1000 or consult the main web page at <http://www.gmu.edu/> to see if classes are cancelled. I expect to cancel class only when the university cancels all classes.

If you are a student with a **disability** and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.

All students are expected to check their **gmuedu e-mail** regularly and are responsible for information sent to their GMU addresses.

## Readings

- Paul A. Shackel, ed. *Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001. ISBN: 0813021049.
- Richard Lyman Bushman. *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*. 1992. Reprint, New York: Vintage, 1993. ISBN 0679744142.
- Lisa C. Tolbert, *Constructing Townscapes: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999. ISBN: 0807847682.
- William Cronon. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. 1991. Reprint, New York: W. W. Norton, 1992. ISBN: 0393308731.
- Alan Trachtenberg. *Reading American Photographs: Images As History*, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans. 1989. Reprint, Hill & Wang, ISBN 0374522499.
- Richard V. Francaviglia. *Hard Places: Reading the Landscape of America's Historic Mining Districts*. 1991. Reprint, University of Iowa Press, 1997. ISBN: 0877456097.
- John R. Stilgoe. *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene*. 1983. Reprint, New Haven: Yale, 1985. ISBN: 0300034814.
- Katherine Solomonson. *The Chicago Tribune Tower Competition: Skyscraper Design and Cultural Change in the 1920s*. 2001. Reprint, University of Chicago Press, 2003. ISBN: 0226768007.
- Alison Isenberg. *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It*. 2004. Reprint, University of Chicago Press, 2005. ISBN: 0226385086.
- Gail Radford. *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. ISBN: 0226702235.
- Adam Rome. *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. ISBN: 0521804906.
- Max Page and Randall Mason, eds. *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2004. ISBN: 0415934435.

Please see the course website for a list of supplemental readings.

## Requirements

See "Assignment Instructions," at the end of the syllabus, for more detailed instructions.

### *Reading responses (60 percent)*

Each week, each student will write a 500-1000 word reaction essay to the assigned book. The essays should not summarize the reading. Rather, they should critique it, explaining its significance, noting its weaknesses, and relating it to other reading the student has done within the course and without. The essays should be designed to stimulate class discussion by provoking other students. In short, they should serve as the good part of a book review. I will post reading notes for each book, but I encourage you to write about what interests you most.

We will read twelve book assignments, but only ten responses are required, to allow for illness, family emergencies, and other problems.

Please post your response on the course discussion board by **10am** each Thursday. Formal footnotes are not required, but please provide page numbers for quotations and key facts. You are free to respond to postings by students in this or other courses, provided you make clear that you are doing so. (“As Joanna states in her posting of October 6 . . . “)

*Discussion leading (15 percent)*

Twice during the semester, each student will join with one or two others to lead the first portion of the seminar. This will require reading an article-length work (listed on the course website under “supplemental reading”) in addition to the assigned book, presenting that additional work to the class, and preparing discussion questions for the group.

*Discussion participation (15 percent)*

Students are expected to be in their seats and ready to take notes at the start of class, and to participate actively in class discussions.

*Basic classroom rules*

- Bring the books we are discussing to class each week.
- Do not eat in the classroom, before or during class.
- Turn off all cell phones, pagers, and other noisemakers.

*Museum/Site Review (10 percent)*

At some point you will visit a historic site or a museum or exhibit focusing on the built environment. Examples include a historic house museum, an exhibit at the National Building Museum, or a neighborhood walking tour (led by a guide who has done her homework). The site may be anywhere in the world. Please consult me with your ideas.

On April 26, you will submit a review of approximately 750-1000 words. On April 26 and May 3, students, will present their reviews to the class, but all written reviews are due on April 26. The review should explore both the site itself and the interpretation of that site by the curators or guides.

**Discussion Board: <http://schrags4.bizhat.com/>**

You will use this site to post responses to readings and lectures. You will need to register to use the board:

- a. On the first page of the board, click “Register.” For your user name, please type your full name, e.g., “Zachary Schrag,” not “Zach,” “zschrags,” or “RetroGirl92.” Please use your gmu.edu address to register. I will need to approve your registration.
- b. Once you have received the registration confirmation, please login and edit your Profile (link from the first page). Change the Timezone to GMT - 4 hours.
- c. To test the system, go to the home page, then click “Practice Forum” You will see one topic: restaurants. Hit “Post Reply” to answer the question.

## Schedule

1. JANUARY 25. INTRODUCTION

2. FEBRUARY 1. MEMORY

Shackel, *Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape*

3. FEBRUARY 8. MATERIAL CULTURE

Bushman, *Refinement of America*, ix-29; 100-279; 353-447

4. FEBRUARY 15. VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

Tolbert, *Constructing Townscapes*

5. FEBRUARY 22. ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY

Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, xv-262; 310-340.

6. MARCH 1. IMAGES

Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*

7. MARCH 8. INDUSTRIAL ARCHEOLOGY

Francaviglia, *Hard Places*

MARCH 15. NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)

8. MARCH 22. LITERATURE

Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor*

9. MARCH 29. ARCHITECTURE

Solomonson. *The Chicago Tribune Tower Competition*

10. APRIL 5. TYPE

Isenberg, *Downtown America*

11. APRIL 12. POLICY (URBAN)

Radford, *Modern Housing*

12. APRIL 19. POLICY (SUBURBAN)

Rome, *Bulldozer in the Countryside*

13. APRIL 26. PRESERVATION AND INTERPRETATION I

Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 3-162

- All exhibit reviews due. Half the class will present this week; the other half on May 3. Please post a response to Page and Mason on the day you do not present your exhibit.

14. MAY 3. PRESERVATION AND INTERPRETATION II

Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 163-328.

# Assignment Instructions

## Reading Response

Professors who wish to force students to not only read assigned texts but to think about them as well may assign reading responses. A reading response is an essay about a book, and like any essay, it must argue a thesis. The thesis should not be the thesis of the author under review. Rather, it is your own argument about the book.

Most published book reviews are poor models for reading responses, since they emphasize summary over analysis, but occasionally a review fits the response form. A good example is Professor Michael S. Sherry's essay, "The Triumph of Democratic Capitalism--Without the Democracy and the Capitalism" (review of John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), *Reviews in American History* 25 (December 1997) 531-536. (The essay is available to Project Muse subscribers.) Gaddis argues that Cold War American policy-makers "were projecting abroad a tradition they had long taken for granted at home: that civility made sense; that spontaneity . . . was the path to political and economic robustness; that to intimidate or to overmanage was to stifle." Sherry replies that "although defensible, such claims are maddeningly unexamined." Sherry does not simply wish that Gaddis had written a different book, for it is Gaddis, not Sherry, who first links domestic politics and foreign policy. In lamenting the lack of evidence for Gaddis's assertions, Sherry takes Gaddis on his own terms and shows that more work must be done. One of my students aptly termed this a "yes, but" approach. Yes, Gaddis makes good points about strategy, but he has failed to prove that American statesmen were committed to democratic values. This thesis applauds what is good in Gaddis's work, and points out a silence that is relevant to Gaddis's argument. Your goal is to craft a comparable argument, one that is both respectful and critical.

To prove your thesis, you need evidence. Your general impression of a work is not enough; you must cite specific facts, with page numbers. Focusing on a specific fact or event lets you show how the author's thesis does or does not explain that fact or event, or how another argument might explain it better. Direct quotation is also helpful, also with page numbers. It is especially important to quote when you disagree with an author, as Sherry does when he wants to show that Gaddis, not he, introduces the themes of civility and spontaneity. In addition to supporting your thesis, you are letting your instructor know how carefully you read. And you are getting ready for class discussion. If you write in your essay that you are unconvinced by an author's assertions about the civility of American politics, you should be ready to raise your hand in class to point to the relevant passage and to ask if your classmates had the same reaction.

While evidence from the assigned book is essential, it is often helpful to include evidence from outside the book as well. In the example, Sherry wants to prove that Gaddis should have paid more attention to race and gender. To make this point, he cites books by Loren Baritz and Michael Hunt. Using one book from a course to understand a later book in the course makes the course into something more than a collection of discrete texts. And applying what you have learned in one course to another course makes your education more than a collection of unrelated topics.

Like evidence, structure is important. A reading response is not like the commentary track on a DVD, in which a director watches the film and says whatever pops into his mind. If anything, it is more like a trailer for the film, in which short clips are presented in a new order, for another result. In Sherry's case, a simple check of page references shows how he has reordered Gaddis's facts and words to suit his purpose.

Writing an essay means knowing what to leave out. Unless a book's format is important to your argument, you need not comment on its typography, the choice of footnotes vs. endnotes, or the presence of a bibliography. Comments on writing style and the use of illustrations may be important, but only if they support your thesis. And even arguments and facts that are very important to the book's author may not be important to your essay. A good response should address one or more issues that are central to understanding the book, but it need not address all such issues. You are approaching the book from one angle, perhaps emphasizing just one theme.

Finally, remember the context. I generally assign reading responses to prepare students for discussion classes. Since the whole class has read the same book, summary is unnecessary. Rather, the response is a chance for you to work out your thoughts about a book on paper, before the discussion itself. Once the discussion begins, you should be prepared to tell your classmates something they do not already know.

### **Article Analysis**

For each article or chapter you read for supplemental reading, you should answer the following questions in writing and in a presentation of 10 minutes at the most.

*What is the question?*

Every good article is the answer to a question. Some historians state their questions explicitly, complete with a question mark at the end. Others may merely imply the question, but the question is still there. What question was the historian trying to answer in this article? Look for a *why* or *how* question. Show how the historian framed the question and showed that it was significant.

*What is the answer?*

What is the thesis of the article? Does it answer the question? What makes it interpretive, precise, and surprising?

*What are the sources?*

What were the historian's most important primary sources? What can this kind of source tell us, and what can't it tell us? What methods did the historian use to get the most out of these sources? Give one example of a source that answers a question well and one example that shows the limits of the source.

*How did this change your understanding of the main reading?*

Since the supplemental readings have been chosen to complement the main readings, please be prepared to explain to the class how they changed your understanding of the main readings.

## Exhibit Review

Note: these are my general review instructions from [www.schrag.info](http://www.schrag.info). The exhibit reviews in *CRM Journal* < [http://crmjournal.cr.nps.gov/Journal\\_Index.cfm](http://crmjournal.cr.nps.gov/Journal_Index.cfm)> provide excellent models. The essays in *Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape* suggest the kinds of critical questions one can ask about sites and exhibits.

History instructors have three good reasons for assigning reviews, whether of books, films, exhibits, tours, or other works. First, a review requirement ensures that students will do the assigned reading, or whatever else is being reviewed. It is much harder to fake familiarity with a work when one is required to write about it. Second, reviews are logistically easy. Students assigned a research paper will necessarily spend a lot of time hunting for a topic, finding sources, and wandering down dead ends. In contrast, if an instructor assigns a review of required reading, the students begin with a topic and their sources, so they can spend their time reading, thinking, and writing. Third, and by far most important, review essays provide practice in one of the most valuable skills offered by a liberal arts education: the skill of critical reading. When I assign a review, it is this skill that I hope to see displayed.

The first step in a review is to describe the work and its topic. For example, if you were to review a biography of Charles Lindbergh, it would be appropriate to give your reader some idea of who Charles Lindbergh was, and why someone might want to read a book about him, before you gallop off to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the book itself. The trick is to provide the necessary summary in as short a space as possible. You will repeat the book author's ideas, not your own, so this section should only be a small part of your review.

The second task is to describe the work itself. That is, rather than telling the story of the Erie Canal, you are now telling a story about how Carol Sheriff wrote a history of the Erie Canal. Here you will ask the sorts of questions I suggested in another essay, "How to Read a History Book." Why did the author choose this topic? Who is her audience? What sources does she use? What arguments does she make? Is the book more analytical or narrative? Is it just words, or pictures too? In short, what was the author trying to do?

Having determined the author's goals, you now explain whether the author achieved those or other goals. For example, if an author states in his first sentence that his "book represents an effort to recast the history of the Second Industrial Revolution," then by all means, your review should at some point evaluate his success in doing so.<sup>1</sup> But it is also perfectly appropriate to go beyond the author's stated goals to ask whether those goals were appropriate to begin with. For example, the U.S. Congress recently expressed concern that the National Park Service was doing a fine job of explaining military history to visitors to Civil War sites, but it was doing little to educate them about the root causes of the war, notably slavery. In this case, the Congress functioned as exhibit reviewer and made the case that the function of Park Service interpretation needed to be reconsidered.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Scranton, *Endless Novelty: Specialty Production and American Industrialization, 1865-1925* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3.

While you do not need to like the work you are reviewing, please remember that criticism is more than complaint. Book authors have a limited number of pages, curators have a limited amount of exhibit space, and everyone is constrained by finite time, money, and sources. Before demanding that a historian take on an additional task, you might think about what portions of a book, exhibit, or film could have been eliminated to make room. Before complaining that the historian focused only on one group of people, ask if other groups left the records the historian would need to tell their stories as well. It may help to imagine that you are giving advice to a historian about to create a work similar to the one you are reviewing. What constructive lessons can you provide?

If this sounds formulaic, it is. Sometimes formulas have their merits. Indeed, perhaps the best preparation for writing a review as a college assignment is to read other academic reviews. Among the best are the review essays (not the capsule reviews) published in the *American Historical Review* and *Reviews in American History*. If you are affiliated with a university, you can read back issues of both journals at JSTOR and more recent issues of *Reviews in American History* at Project Muse. Regardless of your affiliation, you can read similar reviews, though less uniformly excellent ones, at H-Net Reviews.

The important thing to remember is that a book, exhibit, or other scholarly work is a tool with a specific function. To evaluate the tool, you must first understand the function. And having done that, you must explain it to your reader, answering the question, what is this book good for? Along the way, you will find yourself ripping the book apart to see how it works, imagining how it could have been written differently, seeing it from the author's point of view, and, perhaps, comparing it to other works. And that is critical reading.