

The Working Landscape: Founding, Preservation, and the Politics of Place

By Peter F. Cannovò

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The two main practices of land use by humans are alteration and maintenance. We often view these two activities to be in opposing or even antagonistic positions: activities that alter the land inherently preclude its maintenance. In this book Peter F. Cannovò, labeling these two activities as *founding* and *preservation*, argues that current land-use practices and politics in the United States are based on this polarized view of founding and preservation, and calls attention to the problems created by this view and the practices it informs. He offers regional, democratic governance as an alternative approach to the management of places—the book title “the working landscape” refers to this approach.

Cannovò argues that the true problem of current land-use lies in a destructive pursuit of founding that ignores ecological and social significance of the land, not in the practice of founding itself. Founding and preservation, he contends, are not mutually exclusive or incompatible practices. Humans must found in order to live, work, and feel at home, but must also preserve what they founded. Yet the response to destructive founding is often “extreme preservationism,” which overemphasizes conservation and rejects any notion of alteration. These two camps of appropriate land-use—“destructive founding” and extreme preservationism—not only have created disputes over land-use and posed obstacles to resolutions, but have disregarded the needs of individuals and communities attached to the land.

Cannovò uses three case studies—the Northwest timber war, sprawl, and rebuilding of Ground Zero—to illustrate how debates over the use of land are polarized by the emphasis placed on *either* founding *or* preservation. The first case, “timber war,” concerns the conflict over the use of federally owned forests, particularly the old-growth forests, between those who advocate logging for timber and those who promote preservation of nature. The former camp insists on the necessity of human management and economic use of timber while the latter endorses the importance of non-intervention by humans for environmental, aesthetic, or even spiritual reasons. The key players in the two camps are Forest Services and the timber industry on one side and environmentalists on the other.

Locals who relate to the forests through residence, work,

or visiting have also taken one of the two sides. However, as Cannovò points out, the actual relationships of these individuals with the forests are not polarized between founding and preservation. For local residents and timber workers, even though the altering (i.e., logging) of forests is a major source of livelihood, these forests are simultaneously sources of attachment, self-pride, and identity. In other words, people *both* alter *and* maintain their land, and from these actions draw a deep sense of self and meaning. Similarly, in order for occasional visitors (e.g., hikers) to appreciate the forests, some level of domestication (i.e., founding) is required. Both sides of this conflict over timber use have had a top-down character and have disregarded the complexity and real needs of local communities and individuals. While acknowledging that destructive, commercially driven land-use must be discouraged, Cannovò is critical of the arguments of the other side—environmentalists—that overemphasize a kind of preservation that disallows human intervention. He stresses that places are fundamental and relevant to humans. People need to feel attached to and identify themselves with places, as demonstrated by the psychological devastation experienced by many Katrina victims who lost homes and communities.

The second case, “sprawl,” illustrates the problem of excessive *founding*. Cannovò discusses how planned development of a rural area—a kind of development characterized by the imposed zoning of land into residential, commercial, and industrial areas—can cause various problems including a loss of distinctiveness of the land and segregation of residents. This argument parallels that taken by George Ritzer in *The McDonaldization of Society* (1996) in that rational management of land development is efficient but has dehumanizing effects. Opponents of sprawl have not been successful due either to their excessive preservationalism or to inadequate resources.

Cannovò’s third case is about the rebuilding of Ground Zero. First he points out that, since its origin, the World Trade Center was unpopular among local residents due to its overtly commercial nature. When the 9/11 tragedy moved people to place a new meaning on the location of the WTC, two opposing interests in use of the land—one to *preserve* it as a memorial and another to *found* so that profit-making could be restored—emerged and dominated debates. A consensus was reached by a compromise of the two—*parting* the land to allow memorial (i.e., preservation) and profit-making (i.e., founding) use. A third position that sought for integration of the site’s space with that of local communities was not taken into consideration.

Cannovò then discusses the historic processes behind the problematic use of land and the associated ideological polarization. Though market-driven founding by corporate elites

accelerated the exploitative use of land, such land-use originates from the rational, scientific control of land by government. For most of modern history, the focus of these elite sectors was on founding and not preservation. This was finally challenged by environmental movements. However, as pointed out above, such movements have often been detached from the needs of local residents and have overemphasized absolute preservation. But in both of these processes and their accompanying positions, public participation has been limited and both the general public and local groups have been left powerless. Cannovò's response is to advocate democratic and regional governance of land-use, arguing that regionalism, as opposed to the municipal level of participation, is most likely to facilitate local-level decision-making and democratic power.

This is an eye-opening book that leads us to question the adequacy of a black and white way of thinking about the human relationship to land. Cannovò is convincing when he argues that humans are part of ecology and as such need to be both founders and preservationists. The solution to exploita-

tive use of land—or any resource of our environment—should not exclude human existence. A balance between development and preservation must be achieved, and this requires active participation by individuals at the local level who directly relate to the land. Democratic, local decision-making on land-use is important, though regionalism may not suffice as economic competition increasingly globalizes.

Another contribution Cannovò makes is to bring our attention back to the fundamental importance of physical place for humans. Much literature today focuses more on how irrelevant physical spaces have become (e.g., as we spend more time in cyberspace) yet, as Cannovò contends, humans have not ceased to feel attachment to or derive identity from places familiar to them. A wide range of audiences could benefit from this reminder.

Reference

- Ritzer, George. 1996. *The McDonaldization of Society*. Revised edition. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Pine Forge Press.