

LANDSCAPES AND ROADS IN NORTH AMERICA
AND EUROPE:
CULTURAL HISTORY IN TRANSATLANTIC PERSPECTIVE

Conference at the GHI, October 11–13, 2002. Conveners: Christof Mauch (GHI) and Thomas Zeller (GHI). Participants: Rudy Koshar (University of Wisconsin at Madison), Tim Davis (U.S. National Park Service, Washington, D.C.), Robert Buerglener (University of Chicago), Carl Zimring (Carnegie Mellon University), Massimo Moraglio (Politecnico di Torino), Peter Merriman (University of Reading), Michel Conan (Dumbarton Oaks), Thomas Zeller (GHI), Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (University of Hannover), Axel Doßmann (University of Jena), William Rollins (University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand), Matthew Roth (University of Southern California), Suzanne Julin (Public Historian, Missoula, MT), Diane Krahe (Washington State University), Nancy Volkman (Texas A&M University), Jeremy Korr (California State University, Fullerton), Louise Nelson Dyble (University of California, Berkeley).

This international conference brought together scholars working on the aesthetics and politics of landscape. By looking at various examples of road design in the twentieth century, the conference participants tried to assess the meaning of landscape for different countries and under different political regimes. Roads are a particularly useful field of study in this respect, since they are situated at and often represent the borderline between nature and technology, one of the most powerful dichotomies in Western thought. Rather than reinforcing this divide, the conference aimed at historicizing the question of what is natural and what is man-made. Many of the papers were informed by recent methodological approaches in environmental history that seek to shed light on the areas of exchange and transition between nature and technology.

Another goal of the conference was to make possible comparisons between individual countries and their respective ideas and practices of building roads (such as the *autobahn*, *autostrada*, *autoroute*, or motorway) and, thereby, landscapes. During the twentieth century, road designers often claimed that a particular road would express essentially German, French, or American ideas about landscape. In analyzing the rhetorical and technological means that helped to construct these notions, conference participants were able to overcome these ideas of particularity, which had often influenced the historiography as well.

The conference's opening panel, entitled "Inventing Drivers—Creating Roads," introduced the topic of landscaped roads with two broadly

conceived papers. In his contribution, "Driving Cultures and the Meaning of Roads: Some Transnational Examples," Rudy Koshar argued that roads derive their cultural meanings and social resonance not from the actions of engineers or political authorities, but from car drivers. His effort to bring the driver back into the picture was based on a larger understanding of citizenship in twentieth-century societies that included driving cars as a civic activity, not just as a technical skill. Koshar proposed a sequence of three distinct driving practices: pioneering, democratic, and oppositional; each one associated with different historical periods. In his similarly extensive paper, Tim Davis analyzed "The Rise and Decline of the American Parkway." Both technologically and culturally, he asserted, parkways could serve simultaneously as icons of modernity and repositories of traditional values. Federally funded projects such as the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina and Virginia or the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway in suburban Washington, D.C., presented a highly selective version of American history and destiny, according to Davis. Still, they were emulated in other parts of the Western world as well.

One way to make sense of the landscape is by reading signs and markers, which were the subject of the second panel, "Inscribing the Landscape—Constructing the Road." In his paper "The Inscribed Landscape: Early Twentieth-Century Automobile Tourists, Signage, and Route Markings in the U.S.," Robert Buerglener described a process of ordering and classifying landscape through increasingly uniform signs. Organizations such as highway associations and motor clubs physically changed the driving environment through the use of signs and markings, enabling people to drive at higher speeds and with greater predictability. In the 1960s, billboards alongside American roads became the subject of a fierce battle over "highway beautification," as Carl Zimring pointed out. His paper "Neon, Junk, and Ruined Landscape: Competing Visions of America's Roadsides and the Battle Over the Highway Beautification Act of 1965" examined the evolving interests of the scrap metal industry and the outdoor advertising industry. Their commercial motives pitted them against environmentalists and parts of the federal government, in particular Lady Bird Johnson, President Johnson's wife. Zimring asserted that, in the end, economic instead of environmental usages of space prevailed after a long battle.

The next panel, "Designing European Roads," shed light on European constructions of landscape. In a sweeping paper entitled "Landscape and Highways in Italy: Progress and Tradition from the 1920s to the 1970s," Massimo Moraglio described this nation's massive push for road-building in the 1920s and the subsequent growth of the autostrada network. In sharp contrast to the United States and other European coun-

tries, the managers of the Italian highway system deemed it unnecessary to hire landscape architects for beautifying the roads and instead relied on models of increased communication, circulation, and modernization in the most efficient form possible. Until the 1960s, roads could still be portrayed as harbingers of progress. In Peter Merriman's presentation "'Beautified' is a Vile Phrase: The Politics and Aesthetics of Landscaping Roads in Early Postwar Britain," highway design in Great Britain appeared as the outcome of contestations between civil engineers favoring "orderly" roads and the proposals of landscape architects based on horticultural ideas and the long British history of sculpted landscapes. Only in the late 1950s did landscape consultants enter the design process. In his contribution "The Living Landscape of Lassus' Motorways," Michel Conan analyzed the landscaping of French toll roads by Bernard Lassus, a Parisian professor. In this process, Conan argued, rural citizens participated in decisions on design, making landscape a living process rather than a fixed state of nature.

The construction of the Nazi autobahn has been the subject of much scholarship and debate. One of the conference panels took a fresh look at various aspects of road and landscape design in 1930s Germany and beyond. In his paper on "Building and Rebuilding the Landscape of the Autobahn," Thomas Zeller discussed two major issues pertaining to roads as cultural and technological artifacts. First, he argued that speed and speeding on the autobahn were central to its purpose. He emphasized that autobahns were specifically portrayed as tokens of national German pride during the Nazi period. Second, he looked at the civil engineers and landscape architects and the way in which they organized the construction and design of the roads. In particular, Zeller argued that the technological knowledge of engineers gained increasing currency vis-à-vis the ideas and ideals of landscape planners. During the Nazi period, the importance of design decreased over time, partly because of economic constraints. Similarly, in the postwar period concerns of rationality and safety took prominence over landscape architecture. The upsurge of road casualties was blamed on roads, rather than drivers; and the cutting down of trees along the roads was regarded as a necessary tribute to modernization.

In his paper on "Landscape Planning and Reichsautobahnen during the Nazi Period," Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn emphasized Nazi interest in the highway project as a propaganda tool for demonstrating the progressiveness and modernity of National Socialism. He argued that the blood-and-soil ideology of the Nazis, which implied a rejection of everything foreign and had fatal consequences for millions of people, also impacted the planning of German roads and landscapes. Thus, German landscape architects characterized the straight roads of the Italians and

Americans as inappropriate for Germany. Moreover, they advanced a design doctrine for German highways that was both nationalistic and racist as it promoted the exclusive use of native plants. Wolschke-Bulmahn criticized those planners in the Federal Republic who continued to promote native-plant-ideologies after 1945; he suggested that considerations of ecology and plant sociology, rather than nativity, should be stressed in landscape design.

Issues of continuity and change were also addressed in the paper by Axel Doßmann, titled "'Volkseigene Autobahnen': Landscape, Bridges and National Self-Image in the GDR, 1949-1989." Doßmann pointed out that GDR politicians and landscape architects were hoping to establish a clear aesthetic alternative to National Socialism. In reality, however, by trying to distinguish themselves from the Western ideals of the Bauhaus and the International Style, they ended up promoting a type of classic design (for instance in bridge-building) that mirrored Nazi concepts and ideals. Both aesthetic and ecological considerations took a backseat in the planning of GDR highways; and from the 1960s, GDR civil engineers drew much of their technological knowledge and ideas from West German technical literature.

In his presentation "Rooting for Modernity: Native Roadscaping as Self-reflective Modernism," William Rollins characterized the debate about American and German highways in the 1930s and 1940s as essentially a debate about modernism. Specifically, he compared the ideas of the German landscape architect Alwin Seifert with those of the American Frank Waugh. While Seifert emphasized extreme racial ideas, there were also similarities between the German and American landscape concepts. Both seemed to promote a model of *Kulturlandschaft* that would unite utility and beauty; and both concepts included an emphasis on native plants. According to Rollins, Waugh's highways functioned "as a network of green across America." His concept reflected the "boldness of optimism" which seems to have been "typical of many of the landscapers of the 1930s."

Automobile tourism exerted a profound influence on the American landscape and the built environment. One of the conference panels focused on some of the major transformations of landscapes, a development that started early in the twentieth century. In his paper on the "Pacific Coast Highway and the Cultural Construction of Southern California, 1910-1930," Matthew W. Roth demonstrated that the now famous scenic and recreational qualities of the Pacific Coast Highway emerged only during its construction. State engineers used the beauty of the coastal scenery as justification for a project in a remote and isolated part of California. He illustrated his point by focusing on one individual rancher, May Rindge, who, through a number of legal battles, tried to

prevent the highway from cutting through her extensive landholdings. The decision went as far the U.S. Supreme Court, which decided against Rindge in 1923, partly on the grounds that driving through the beauty of a scenic landscape was to be seen as a public good. In her paper about "Automobile Tourism and Scenic Roads in South Dakota's Custer State Park, 1919-1932," Suzanne Julin discussed the construction and use of scenic roads as tourist attractions in the Black Hills. The private South Dakota tourist industry had encouraged road planners to produce a unique landscape that would prove to be stunning and filled with unexpected features and vistas. The highway seemed to reveal itself to the adventure-seeking automobile tourists, while in reality it had been carefully planned to create a dramatic drive.

One of the most overlooked factors in the construction of roads is ethnicity. In her paper on "The 'Roading' of Texas," Nancy Volkman analyzed Spanish and German traditions in road design. Her research was informed by multiple observations about the layout of towns, places, and streets, about planning authorities, street surfaces, methods of surveying, the location of roads in relation to waterways, etc. Among the many features that set the two ethnic traditions in road design apart was the fact that Germans did not plan roads based upon a scheme dictated by the government. In the Spanish tradition, through-roads radiated out only from the major towns, while German communities constructed their roads in more diverse ways and to serve specific commercial and social purposes. In her paper, titled "Keeping American Indian Lands 'Roadless' and 'Wild'," Diane Krahe discussed a New Deal scheme to keep tribally-owned lands roadless. Robert Marshall, perhaps the most outspoken voice for wilderness in the U.S. in the 1930s, believed in the now outdated notion that Native Americans did little to impact their local environments. According to Marshall, Native Americans did not want for more than what nature provided. As a federal administrator, Marshall projected onto Indian people his view of "roadless nature as the ultimate state of nature." In the 1950s, a pro-development attitude both on many reservations and in the Bureau of Indian Affairs contributed to the demise of the Indian roadless areas. The Wind River Roadless Area in Wyoming is the only one that survives to this day.

While the majority of papers in this conference was concerned with the design of roads and with roads as cultural artifacts, the presentations of the last panel focused primarily on political issues and the role of the public in the development of roads. In a paper titled "National, Environmental, and Planning Implications of the Capital Beltway In and Around Washington, D.C.," Jeremy Korr presented his research on the Capital Beltway, a major ring road around the nation's capital. Korr pointed out that the Beltway serves multiple constituencies within a framework of

federal, state, county, and municipal authorities and demands. Korr's case study showed that many of the public's concerns about safety, noise, and environment were not addressed appropriately by transportation officials. Even when public hearings were organized, residents who were invited to discuss the planning process felt excluded as their concerns were not adequately acknowledged. In contrast to Korr's study, Louise Nelson Dyble, in her paper on "Roads as a Political Weapon: Freeways and the Defeat of Suburbanization in Marin County, California," presented the case of a successful effort of conservationists and environmentalists who halted the development of bridges and roads. Even though Marin County was dominated by pro-growth lobbyists and real-estate developers in the late 1950s, the process of highway development turned out to be vulnerable to public protest. According to Dyble, the planned road provided the opportunity for a fledgling group of environmentalists to rally property owners to the cause of preservation. The new movement challenged the prevailing vision of Marin County's future. It led to the "1966 freeway revolt" and marked a turning point in attitudes and planning for growth and development. Altogether, the papers of this pioneering conference in the comparative history of roads created a new awareness of how our surroundings reflect important cultural and technological changes, and how the meaning of roads has changed over time.

Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller