READING A RUIN

The East Railroad Corridor of Madison, Wisconsin

In his 1979 essay, "The Beholding Eye," D. W. Meinig wrote, "We gather together and look in the same direction at the same instant, we will not – we cannot – see the same landscape."[1] Looking at American cities, if there is any thing in common that every one recognizes at first sight, it is the extensive grid system. The grid layout, with its long, empty streets, and repeating forms of evenly spaced buildings, is the main characteristic of the urban American landscapes. Actually, this layout is no different than the grid system of an ancient Roman city. A classical pattern, the grid, created by architect Hippodamus, in the 5th century BC, follows man wherever he goes. This classical scene represents one of the best examples of man shaping the land. In this layout, lonely, neglected parts of American cities seem just like the Roman ruins of the Mediterranean.

The concept of 'ruin' implies irreversible harm but not total destruction. Ruins symbolize neglect, decay, and loneliness but also hope and continuity of a not-yet-ended life. Either classical or modern, marble or brick, ruins stand as rich documents of the past. When does a landscape become a ruin? A landscape does not become a ruin only with harm and destruction, but also needs some time to ripen. Time has to be written on every inch of it. Everything around a landscape can change, but somehow the landscape itself stays forgotten. Only then does a landscape become a ruin.

---

[1] D. W. Meinig, "The Beholding Eye, ten Versions of the same Scene." In D. W. Meinig, ed. *The Interpretation of Ordinary landscapes: geographical essays*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p.34.

Yasemin Gulec Can
History 460 - Section 301, November 2007

This paper is about a modern ruin, a forgotten landscape; the East Railroad Corridor of Madison, Wisconsin. The East Railroad Corridor is located on the southern half of the Isthmus. It lies just five blocks east of the State Capitol Building and extends up to Yahara River. This urban landscape is over a 130-acre tract of land that consists of historic industrial buildings and railroad development. Once a key part of the city's economic life, today the landscape is an almost vacant storage area in the middle of dense urban development. Beginning in the 1950s and up to the present, most of the former factories have closed or moved out to suburban locations. From then on, the East Railroad Corridor has been in a state of neglect and decay, and these create its rich texture. Today, the winds of change are blowing. The objects from the **past** and the plans for the **future** are so strong in the East Railroad Corridor, that there is no **present**. Stuck between past and future, it is the perfect ruin.

The Story of Becoming a Ruin

Places often take their names from their functions. But maybe due to the lack of a clear function, ruins sometimes carry the names of their impressive past or their promising future. The name "East Railroad Corridor' reflects a vision of what the area will be in the future. On the southern sections of the landscape, a bike path runs along the railroad tracks and a new park is being planned on the same path. Few manufacturing facilities have been renovated to become office spaces. The railroad is the only element in this future vision that remains from the past. Even though the new life that has been planted on its southern border

does not actually touch the landscape itself yet, it is strong enough to give the place its new name.

During the days of heavy manufacturing, the area was called "the factory district."[2] This period of the landscape began with the industrial growth of the late 1800s, and lasted until the 1950s, when much of the industrial process was in decline. Almost all the landscape elements that remain today are from that particular era. In this story, the most important of these is the railroad. The railroad came first, and everything else found its place around it. The railroad shaped the entire area, but it was not the main reason for its existence as an industrial landscape. The reasons were hidden in the larger context, in the landscapes that were interconnected by the railroads.

Rather than moving the goods on rivers from north to south, railroads allowed east-west connections.[3] In Wisconsin Territory, railroads moved produce, goods and people in the east-west direction between two important waterways, the Mississippi River and Lake Michigan. Originally, the rail line was proposed to connect the lead mines of the southwest to Lake Michigan. As agriculture, especially wheat, became the major industry in the 1840s, transportation routes to the growing eastern markets became inevitable. The first railroad in the state, the Milwaukee & Mississippi, opened between Milwaukee and Waukesha in 1851 and reached Madison in 1854.[4]

---

[2] David V. Mollenhoff, *Madison, A History of the Formative Years.* Madison: University of Wiconsin Press, 2003, p. 181.
[3] Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The nature of landscape in New Orleans.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, p. 14.
[4] Mollenhoff, p. 52.

Wheat was what brought the railroads to the Wisconsin Territory, and was critical for the entire state. Wheat also created the first industries on the east side of Madison. Water power from Lake Mendota had to be harvested to grind the wheat into flour.[5] A canal, mills, breweries and the plow industry; all started with 'wheat.' The railroads that carried the wheat to the east brought more people and the first rats back to the town. As the population increased, new industries grew to surround the railroad grounds. By the end of the nineteenth century, the city had spread to its natural limits and only marshlands were left undeveloped.

With its large population, Madison now needed not only more land but also more city services. As in most urban areas in the late 1800s, the disposal of sewage had become a major problem. Especially the Great Central Marsh on the east isthmus was a main dumping ground for cesspool contents.[6] Outbreaks of epidemic diseases had become a serious threat for city residents. With its critical location on isthmus, the Great Central Marsh was also a threat to the city's image. By 1887, the developers began land-filling activities. After a long, troublesome process of land-draining and land-filling, the Great Central Marsh was converted to the Factory District. Ruins have ruins underneath; underneath the factory district lies the Great Central Marsh. Signs of the marsh still exist, for those who look closely. Today the story of the Great Central Marsh is written on the facades of the buildings, as settlement cracks.

In many ways, the East Railroad Corridor is not an uncommon landscape. Industrialization created similar scenes all over the United States. This landscape's

[5] Mollenhoff, p. 46.
[6] Mollenhoff, p. 206.

distinctiveness lies in the details of its past manufacturing days. In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, the Great Plains was being settled, and was extensively cultivated. The industrial and agricultural revolutions went hand in hand. Wisconsin and Illinois, in the heart of the agricultural area, became the natural center for the manufacture of agricultural implements.

During this time, one of the first factories in the eastern section of the East Railroad Corridor opened in 1880. The Johnson and Fuller Manufacturing Company was an agricultural implement business, founded by a Norwegian industrialist, John A. Johnson. The history of agriculture in the Great Plains is written on the Johnson and Fuller Manufacturing Company's line of implements. The company produced plows, cultivators, harrows, mowers. The plow was an especially important tool for breaking prairie sod, and Johnson and Fuller quickly built a large market and strong reputation with their plow, the Bonanza Prairie Breaker.[7] As corn replaced wheat in the Midwest, the company also played a major role in innovating seed-sowing techniques. Situated in the tobacco-growing region of southern Wisconsin, Fuller and Johnson led the market in tobacco transplanting machines as well. In 1885, Johnson decided to make the machine tools for agricultural implements himself, and opened a second factory, the Gisholt Machine Company, in the same district. With two successful factories located within the eastern boundaries of the Great Central Marsh, the landscape became the natural seat of manufacturing industries.[8] Soon after this, in 1895, one of the brightest mechanical engineers of the Gisholt Company, Conrad M. Conradson - a

[7] Mollenhoff, p. 175.
[8] Mollenhoff, p.181.

graduate of UW-Madison - founded the Northern Electrical Manufacturing Company. The factory, built on a block in the eastern section of the marshland, produced electric motors. Today, all three factory buildings remain partially intact.

While the industrial and agricultural revolution of the late 1800s left ruins on the eastern section of the landscape, the western section of the area tells the history of power production, beginning with the dim gas lamps that lit the night. Before the days of commercial electrical generators, Madison Gas, Light and Coke Company produced coal gas for city street lights.[9] Ten years after Thomas Edison's invention of the incandescent light bulb in 1876, electricity was being used to light the streets of Madison. After a long transition, the Madison Gas, Light and Coke Company was bought in 1896 by a New York utility syndicate, which formed a new company, Madison Gas and Electric (MG&E).

In 1902, MG&E built a power plant, the first gas-powered central station electric plant in the United States, on Blount Street.[10] But as energy technology advanced, MG&E discontinued its experimental gas-powered generators and by 1915 began to use steam-powered electric generators. During this time, the MG&E power plant brought street lighting, streetcars, and the first gas stoves to Madison. Today the plant still provides an important part of the city's energy needs. The railroad tracks that carried coal to the plant throughout the 20th century remain partially in use. While the oldest part of the MG&E Plant still burns coal to this day, its other boilers burn natural gas, oil, and alternative fuels. By the end of

[9] Elizabeth L. Miller, "National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the Madison Gas and Electric Power Plant," 2001, Section 7, p.1.
[10] David Atwood ed. *Madison Past and Present.* Madison: Wisconsin State Journal, 1902. p. 191.

2011, MG&E will retire its coal burning section: on that day, a page in the history of energy production in the East Railroad Corridor will be closed.[11]

Today, the MG&E power plant is surrounded by electric regulation stations, transmission poles, and railroad tracks. The electric transmission poles not only represent produced energy and its transportation, but also incoming energy from out-sources, transmitted from a substation to other locations. The railroads, coal fields, and smoke stacks that used to be the symbol of power production, are now giving way to transmission lines that travel across the countryside and reach the city after a long journey.[12] In its current setting, the MG&E power plant stands in the middle of the past and the future, with railroads on one side and transmission lines on the other.

Not only power plants, but water and telephone services were also located in the east railroad corridor. With the addition of buildings for these services, the landscape became a more important part of city life in the 1920s. In addition to being a center for city services and industrial production in the past, the East Railroad Corridor housed the early industrial research facilities as well. In the first decades of the 1900s, industrial development had created new industries. One of these new industries, the dry battery industry, was located in the East Railroad Corridor.[13]

Battery production in the East Railroad Corridor had begun in 1906, with the French Battery Company. Later a professor of chemical engineering from the University of

[11] MG&E web site. http://www.mge.com/about/powerplants/blount/BlountWorks.html.
[12] Michael Hough, *Out of Place; Restoring Identity to the Regional Landscape.* London: The Architectural Press, 1958, p.125.
[13] Katherine H. Rankin and Timothy Heggland, Madison Intensive Survey, Research and Development Section, 1995, p: 41.

Wisconsin-Madison, Dr. C. F. Burgess, became associated with the company. Burgess designed flashlight batteries in his independent research lab, in the East Railroad Corridor. The University of Wisconsin played a critical role in the development of the dry battery industry. At that time, such enterprises among the university professors were common. Burgess later founded his own company in the area, the Burgess Battery Company. In the 1920s, the growth of the battery industry became one of the most successful examples of industry-university collaboration. With the dry battery industry, the landscape represents another era in industrial development, that of an early version of high-technology industry.[14]

In this landscape, all these manufacturing, research, and service activities took place away from the public eye. In the design of such landscapes, manufacturing activities were usually shielded by buildings placed along the street frontage.[15] The factory district had its public façade along East Washington Avenue, most commonly in the form of warehouses. Most of the companies that were located along this avenue had other facilities and additions on the southern sections of the blocks. These facilities had an advantageous location with easy access to important services such as railroad transportation and cheap electrical power. The railroad tracks extending to the southern sections of the warehouses are evident in the historic maps.[16] Today, as you walk along Main Street, one block south of East Washington Avenue, you can see pieces of railroad tracks left from these days, although these pieces of the past are covered with weeds, and hard to recognize. Most of the buildings along East

[14] Mollenhoff, p. 260.
[15] Betsy Hunter Bradley, *The Works: The Industrial Architecture of the United States*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 60.
[16] Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, Madison, 1892, 1908 and 1941.

Washington Avenue are still used for general warehousing and storage. But today, trucks in the parking lots have taken the place of railroad cars.

Every layer in a landscape's history has an end. Even though the factory district of the past became obsolete, its ruins are standing in front of us. Looking at them, the first question we may ask is why and how did this landscape become obsolete? The answers to these questions are hidden in the general patterns of change in the social life, technology, and industry since the late nineteenth century. Maybe a harder question to answer is what this ruin means today. What to do with that?

The past is written on the building facades, or on the railroad tracks. What this landscape means today, is hidden in the smaller, common landscape elements that are later added to this ruin. Today wire fencing bounds almost every parcel. The repeating "No Trespassing" or "Do not enter" signboards are placed on the fencing and scattered all around the area. Apparently from the ruins of an industrial past, a strong political landscape emerged.

When James Duane Doty and his surveyor J. V. Suydam laid out the first plat of Madison, in 1836, they started a new layer of life over one that has been there for centuries. The parcels that are today surrounded with wire fencing were created by then. So at some level, a political landscape was already there. The low marshy lands of the east isthmus became a commodity once the lines and boundaries were drawn. Private property boundaries symbolize ownership; but most importantly, they are for building a relationship with the surrounding, for understanding and respecting each others rights. The wire fences on the

landscape today carry meanings beyond being a definition of private property. They are an element of isolation rather than a shared life.

Once, the factory district was an interconnected landscape. The railroads used to tie every piece together. And every piece of the landscape relied on the other. The East Railroad Corridor lost most of its railroad tracks after the 1960s, due to decreased manufacturing activities. Since then the landscape fell apart. And, every piece of this ruin is now bounded with wire fencing.

As the connections between the various elements disappear, the landscape becomes harder to read. In this landscape, broken apart with wire fencing, a new pattern is emerging. It is a new landscape that now is being built upon the old one. As time passes, the ruins of the factory district will get lost. Just as the Great Central Marsh, these ruins will become another layer underneath the new landscape. But for those who look closely its signs will be there.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Meinig, Donald W. "The Beholding Eye, Ten Versions of the Same Scene." In *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, D. W. Meinig, eds., 33-50. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Bradley, Betsy Hunter. *The Works: The Industrial Architecture of the United States*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

David V. Mollenhoff. *Madison, A History of the Formative Years.* Madison: University of Wiconsin Press, 2003.

Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, p. 14.

Hough, Michael. *Out of Place; Restoring Identity to the Regional Landscape.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990.

Newspapers, Journals, and Magazines

Atwood, David. "Madison Past and Present." *Wisconsin State Journal,* 1902.

MG&E presentation to the City of Madison Energy Task Force Utility Subcommittee, Nov. 19 2003.

Miller, Elizabeth L. "National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the Madison Gas and Electric Power Plant," 2001.

Reasonable Energy, "Blount Generating Station Fact Sheet," 01/26/2006, MG&E Company Document.

State Historic Preservation Office, Wisconsin Historical Society, "Wisconsin Architecture & History Inventory," Survey dates: 1973 and 1982, 2001.

Online Sources

"Power plants, Purchased Power," Madison Gas and Electric Company website. See: http://www.mge.com/about/powerplants

"How Blount plant Works?" Madison Gas and Electric Company website. See: http://www.mge.com/about/powerplants/blount/BlountWorks.html.