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### Charles Cushman's Journey through the American Landscape, 1938-1969

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by Eric Sandweiss, Carmony Associate Professor of History at Indiana University

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*Eric Sandweiss is Carmony Associate Professor of History at Indiana University, and editor of the Indiana Magazine of History. Prior to coming to Bloomington, he served as Director of Research at the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, and as an independent preservation historian in San Francisco. Sandweiss's research and writings focus on the history of everyday urban landscapes. This essay is part of a longer-term study of Cushman and his work.*

For thirty years, Charles Cushman documented a dying landscape in living color.

Packing his car with camera, lenses, and film, his tripod, his notebooks and—often as not—his first wife, Jean (who was not, to judge from the expression on her face in Cushman's occasional carside portraits, always a happy traveling companion), this extraordinary amateur photographer pursued a life on the road, and in the streets, of mid-twentieth-century America. Whatever its effect upon his marriage, Cushman's peripatetic compulsion did result in a remarkable gift to future historians, photography lovers, and students of Americana. For here, framed through the lens of his [Contax IIA camera](#), saturated in almost embarrassingly vivid colors, springs to life a world that we had long since resigned ourselves to viewing only in shades of gray. The America that we thought we knew, whether through the self-conscious artistic starkness of the images of Berenice Abbott and Walker Evans or through the polished middle-brow poses of *Look* and *Life*, is revealed as being but the shadow of a world no less full and tangible than our own. In Cushman's work the past becomes, for an instant, impossibly present.

While we know from his penchant for flowering trees, shapely women, and doe-eyed children that Cushman was something of a sentimentalist, it is nonetheless true that even the most impersonal of his pictures, viewed many years later, radiates a poignancy that is likely quite different from any he intended at the time. The poignancy derives from the fact that it is impossible to look at these images today without knowing that the suddenly vibrant world they bring to life is in fact unreachable; that even as we first make its acquaintance, that world has already receded before us in a manner that not even the miracle of living color can reverse. Cushman's camera captures a vanished America, a place lit for one moment by a brilliant flash of recall, only to fade once again into the obscurity to which we as a society have consigned it, thanks to our collective choices about how we wish to live.

This essay traces some of the most important elements of the compelling but now largely gone world that Charles Cushman traversed from 1938 until 1969 when, just before Jean's death, he ceased to take slide pictures. While it is no doubt true that one could study a great number of things through these pictures—from postwar Europe to western flora to women's fashion design—or that one can simply enjoy them as wonderful images, they will constitute for my purposes here a lens on the American landscape. In this, they are as informative as (if not more so than) their closest, and far better-known, point of comparison: the body of work produced, under Roy Stryker's direction, by the Farm Security Administration and Standard Oil documentary projects in the 1930s and 1940s. For students of the landscape, Cushman's photographs offer a number of advantages over the already well-mined but still compelling Stryker projects: there is, first,

the startling verisimilitude of Cushman's color (still something of a rarity in FSA images); there is the advantage of the duration of his work, which captured the American landscape not at a moment but across four decades; there is the singularity of his vision, which resulted in a large body of scenes seen through one man's eyes rather than many; and there is the intriguing fact that Cushman remained to the end an amateur—a person who, so far as we know, carried no desire to make his way into the hierarchy of critically accepted, professional documentary photographers.

Timing, as they say, is everything, and while we can choose neither our parents nor the moment at which they conceive us, Cushman came of age—and pursued his obsessions—in a time that proved singularly apt for one witnessing the passage from one period of American life to another. In the long arc of his career as a color photographer, the modern age—an age of steel and coal, of fast locomotives and crowded ghetto streets—passed into history. Its mark upon the landscape, however, lingered; the factories and tenements, burnished with time, had mellowed or withered to the point that they could, in Cushman's eyes, join Indiana wheat fields and Texas cotton farms as scenes in a passing panorama of familiar Americana. While advertisement and industrial design, no less than political rhetoric, continued through the 1930s and beyond to promise Americans prosperity, abundance, and efficiency (a promise captured well in the carnivalesque architecture of San Francisco's Golden Gate International Exhibition, which Cushman photographed in 1940), the fact is that the Depression exerted a major and long-lasting drag on the ability of Americans to realize, in the actual settings in which they led their lives, the visions of modernity that surrounded them in art and advertisement. It is because of this drag that Charles Cushman could still, when he laid down his camera in 1969, see around him less the "world of tomorrow," as promised by the 1939 San Francisco and New York world's fairs, than the world of his own yesterdays.

Cushman's own career as an amateur photographer was not unrelated to this sequence of events. He, like most Americans, knew well the bitterness of the Depression that had followed hard on the economic euphoria of the mid-1920s. While cushioned from its worst effects by savings and investments he had made (and married into—Jean's father worked as a successful advertising executive) earlier in his career, he was, like millions of others, thrown out of work. And it was in the wake of that unexpected encounter with the world of the unemployed—after the failure of his venture with the Drewry's brewery in Chicago—that Cushman first matched his longtime interest in photography with the two elements that would combine to create the visual legacy documented on this web site: Kodachrome film and late-model cars. The pattern set by those first drives of 1938 and 1939, and by his nearer-to-home early explorations of the neighborhoods of Chicago, both of them documented courtesy of Kodak's newly available color slide film, would provide Cushman with a basic method of operating that lasted nearly until his death.



We know, whether from our own memories or from history books, that people's lives changed enormously from the 1930s to the 1960s, but we forget the extent to which their surroundings remained the same. While the Depression of course ended and Cushman (employed, like so many others in the early 1940s, by the federal government) eventually found himself earning a salary once again, the effects of the global downturn in investment would remain visible in the landscapes of the city and countryside long after American families ceased to feel them at the dinner table. The construction industry,

dependent as it was on capital-intensive, long-term investment, took far longer to turn around than did other sectors of the national economy. Significant reconstruction of the central cities would not begin until passage of federal urban renewal legislation in the 1950s; even then, actual implementation of grand renewal schemes—as in San Francisco's Embarcadero Center, Chicago's

McCormick Place, or Philadelphia's Society Hill—was seldom realized before the mid-1960s. Downtown skylines, despite the occasional appearance of such conspicuous modernist landmarks as New York's Seagram's Building or Portland, Oregon's, Equitable Building, still reflected the outline of the last great period of office construction: the 1920s. (At times, as in his 1962 views taken from the newly built tower addition to the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco (left), or his pictures taken the following year from atop Chicago's Prudential Building, built in 1955 (right), Cushman used new buildings simply as a vantage from which to view better the profile of the more familiar pre-1930 city.) The construction activity sponsored by New Deal programs such as the WPA and TVA, while undeniably enormous in its scope, was nevertheless site-specific. One could travel far and wide—as Cushman did—and (with occasional exceptions such as his visits to the Hoover and Grand Coulee dams) see little of the effect of government spending on the landscape. The great refineries and factories built between the turn of the century and the 1920s remained in place, even though the US's productive supremacy, in the face of stepped-up foreign oil production and globalizing industrial workforces, already stood on shaky ground. And while private housing initiatives like Levittown and Sun City found their way into headlines (and as a result, into later history books) as the harbingers of a new, mass-scale suburban culture, they did so without erasing the complex and still quite dynamic urban and suburban residential neighborhoods of the pre-Depression era. The popular image of Ricky-and-Lucy families moving from their cramped city apartments into new suburban domiciles is not altogether wrong. Annual production of new housing units jumped from 200,000, in 1945, to 1.4 million just five years later. But the majority of Americans, as of 1956, still lived in homes built before 1929 ([U.S. Census Bureau, 1960](#) 749, 767).



In other words, Cushman's America, as revealed in the more than 14,000 images on this web site, is a place still cast more in the mold of the past than of the future. In his slides we see the final stage, the downward slope, of a long era of construction and accumulation that began with the canal and railroad projects of the mid-1800s, accelerated with the organization of massive, steam-driven manufacturing operations and closely spaced residential neighborhoods, and finally transformed under the dispersing influence of electrical power and internal combustion engines. The interstate highway system was, at the time that Cushman put away his last camera, still only a dozen years old. Suburbs—today home to a majority of Americans—housed only 35 percent of the population, the same number as those living outside of metropolitan areas altogether ([U.S. Census Bureau, 1970](#) 16).

If we follow Cushman down the road, keeping in sight of the well-polished bumper of his latest Zephyr or Ford, we begin to get a sense not only of how he worked but of how this world worked—that is, of how its varying elements fit together. Cushman's pictures, because he catalogued them so meticulously, document his progress around the countryside and into and around the cities. Seen as elements of many continuous, time-linked sequences, rather than as isolated images, they give us the same sense of motion, of the dips and swings of visual interest and experience, that attracted the photographer himself as he traveled about. Further, they remind us of the logic by which different functions and forms find their way into discrete but related places in the landscape. The mountainside, after all, provided ore for the factory, which offered work to the laborer, who bought the house with money borrowed from the bank, which built the downtown office building, etc. That one person captured images of each of these elements—often on the same journey—helps us to remember the links that connect them, even as we appreciate the intrinsic qualities inherent to each.

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## The Countryside

Like most early twentieth-century Indianans, Cushman was the product of a small town—in his case, Poseyville, an agricultural community located not far from the junction of the Ohio and Wabash rivers, in the southwest corner of the state. His most direct driving route to Poseyville from his adopted city of Chicago lay along US Highway 41, which parallels much of the western edge of Indiana. The drive to and from Posey County was one of the most frequent of the many rural routes that Cushman would take in his years on the road, and thus one of the best documented. It was on this route that he indulged his soft spot for images of flowers and flowering trees (easily Cushman's most common subject, besides street scenes) and began to document agricultural scenes not far removed from those he had known as a boy at the turn of the century.

The southern counties of Indiana, traditionally closer in their culture and geography to upper South than to northern portions of Indiana, were good places for Cushman to find the sort of small-scale, pre-mechanized farming that he favored as a photographic subject. In his photograph labeled "A Posey County farmer works his hillside acres" (right) he captures a lone worker traversing his hillside field after the autumn harvest.



Climbing atop a nearby hill (one of his most enduring methods for shooting landscape), Cushman demonstrates the larger context into which such scenes fit (left). Here, above a line of leafless trees, the viewer follows a small country road—likely laid along the border between adjacent quarter-section lines—faced by at least three farmsteads. These are not great rural estates or factory farms but small working farms, limited by the rolling topography and by their owners' means from expanding to the scale allowed

by the Illinois prairie or the Great Plains. Early the following spring, returning to his family home once more, Cushman turned his lens to a picturesquely derelict Posey County farmhouse (right) that captured well the "pioneer" spirit that earlier Indiana artists such as T.C. Steele and Otto Stark had sought to represent in their landscapes: its chimney stack tilting, its outhouse and shed joined in the yard by a wagon and plow, the building seems a relic of earlier days. It could easily



have been the home of the couple whose picture he shot later in the same year: the wife driving a two-horse wagon, the husband operating a simple tractor-drawn plow as they complete another harvest (left). While we know that Cushman's eye was naturally drawn to rustic images, it is equally true that they were what he saw, early in his travels: rural counties like Posey, in 1940, were still in many ways unchanged from forty years earlier. Posey County alone was home to more than 1600 farms; they averaged a modest 140 acres in size ([Historical](#)

[Census Data Browser](#)).

Cushman's taste for small-scale rustic scenes stayed with him wherever he went. In images of cotton pickers in [Texas](#) and [Arizona](#), of farms and farmers in Alabama (right), and of [California ranches](#) he continued to document the sort of small family farmsteads that he remembered from his own boyhood. Occasionally, as in a 1949 trip through northern Indiana or a 1951 drive in Louisiana, he documented the use of [newer, motor-driven combines and harvesters](#). But his agricultural landscape, as late as the 1960s, is not the landscape of consolidated farms and heavy machinery that he could have found, had he looked for it in many of the places that he traversed. The business of agriculture had changed, but Cushman's pictures did not; at some point he stopped shooting simply what he saw and started looking pointedly for the remnants of a way of life that had already, in many places, been obliterated by suburbanization, by abandonment and reforestation, or by consolidation into larger farms tended with mechanized equipment.



Finally, it is worth noting the presence of the road, itself, as an important element in Cushman's rural photographs. Before passage of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, the US Highway system, formalized legally in the 1920s and steadily improved in the decades that followed, offered crosscountry access along traditional transportation routes (generally, existing roadbeds, themselves frequently the byproducts of adjacent trails, canals, and railroad routes). Unlike the eventual interstate routes whose early development he eventually included in several urban scenes from the 1960s, the state and US highways along which Cushman traveled were engineered in a manner that affected only minimally the nearby landscape. Absent the wide paved shoulders, guardrails, central medians, generous on- and off-ramps, and elaborate above- or below-grade crossings that characterize interstate highway construction, these roads seldom intruded in any obvious way upon the existing land uses

around them. Looking at the view (characteristically from a hilltop looking down) of California highway 89 outside the town of Coleville (left), we see a road—more isolated, perhaps, but not otherwise atypical of those that Cushman drove—laid upon a landscape that otherwise reflects no trace of its presence. The idea of the rural highway as a site, in its own right, of concentrated development (rather than primarily as a route between existing nodes of activity) was as yet only partially realized in Cushman's journeys.

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## The Factory in the Field

Cushman did not, on the other hand, turn a blind eye to the industrial operations that were scattered across the American countryside, often in the most seemingly desolate of areas. As they had from the earliest days, Americans depended on the benefits of artifice associated with natural resources that were often located far from settled areas. By the twentieth century, many of the nation's greatest fortunes, long since cleaned and scrubbed of any association with such primal activities, were derived from minerals scraped out of the earth in the Rocky Mountains, on the Pacific Slope, or along the Gulf Coast shoreline. As he drove, Cushman often stopped to take note of such manufacturing facilities as they interrupted the pastoral landscape. In the hamlet of Perrysville, Indiana, by the Wabash River, he found a scene strangely reminiscent of his own shots of the beautiful Indiana dune





country, not far to the north. Here, however, Cushman's lens depicts not the shore's natural beauty but the treeless waste left by strip mining coal—a fuel that made possible alike the great steel plants and the innumerable homes of Chicago, where so many of Cushman's photographic journeys took place. One thousand miles to the southwest, on the flat, dry prairie outside of Odessa, Texas, he photographed the pall of the Richardson Carbon Company plant rising above the distant horizon (right), while further west, still, the pristine high desert east of Phoenix, Arizona, is broken by the stacks of the Inspiration Copper Mine (left), built in 1909 and still, in 1953, busy reducing raw ore into the material used for the pipes and electrical wires that underlay the American city. Cushman's scenes of rural industrial production remind us of Americans' enormous dependence on the countryside, not just for food or for comforting scenery, but for some of the basic products of our urban existence.

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## The Edge of Town

The experience of coming from the rural outskirts—whether natural, agricultural, or industrial—into towns and cities is particularly important in Cushman's work, and we can count ourselves fortunate that he stopped as often as he did to document the transition. Where he could, Cushman sought out a vantage point sufficiently distant from the city to allow for a comprehensive view, and in this manner he has given us striking views of such industrial towns as Birmingham, Alabama (seen from atop nearby Red Mountain, beside that city's signature statue of the god Vulcan, right), [Johnstown, Pennsylvania](#) (framed in a view strikingly reminiscent of Walker Evans' 1936 photograph of another Pennsylvania mining town, Bethlehem) and [Klamath Falls, Oregon](#). In the case of such industrial cities, Cushman knew that he could usually expect to find such steep elevations close at hand: access to both water power and carbon resources (or lumber) were long among the most basic desiderata of extractive industries like mining and lumber milling, and the two tend to come together in steeply sloping sites not otherwise obviously conducive to settlement.



Not all urban outskirts, of course, were easily viewed from on high, just as not all cities depended on extractive industry. But in seeking to frame his downtown portraits Cushman invariably found his way to the industrial edges—switching yards and warehouses, docks and parking lots—that afforded clear views of the nearby, more "presentable," urban scene. He captured the dynamic mercantile skyline of Dallas, for example, from the railroad yards southwest of downtown (left), and he crossed the Cuyahoga River in order to frame an image of [downtown Cleveland and its Terminal Tower](#). In the case of his longtime home of Chicago, Cushman was a frequent visitor to the Indiana Harbor area, where the Calumet River opens onto Lake Michigan and where years of channeling had opened the way for ocean-going vessels to reach the adjacent mills of East Chicago and Gary. His photographs of the Second City's long and unlovely southern edge (see, among others, [these photos](#)) provide us with one of the best visual records available of the landscape of the steel industry—an industry on which the city's wealth depended, even as its operations were pushed beyond city and even state limits.

The transition from countryside to town was much more easily comprehended in the case of small towns, where the quick appearance of roadside businesses signalled to the traveler his arrival at a notable destination. Cushman's entry into the small railroad town of Helper, Utah (right), provides a good illustration of the kind of scene upon which he arrived numerous times in his travels. Not preceded, as such approaches generally are today, by the incremental appearance of a Dairy Queen, a gas station or two, an auto parts store, and other businesses that depend on capturing the automotive traveler before he disappears into town, US Highway 50 quickly takes on the appearance of a small town Main Street, with a few well-kept bungalows, a three-story brick hotel, and a line of steel streetlights signalling the visitor's arrival into town. Similar views, of places as dispersed as [Poseyville, Indiana](#), [Juarez, Mexico](#), and [Sioux Falls, South Dakota](#) attest both to the universality of the Main Street streetscape and to its intimate connection with the long-distance travel routes that would, in later years, bypass such town centers altogether. When they did so, the purpose, and the economic well-being, of Main Street was forever changed.



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## The Neighborhoods

Cushman generally took little more than an establishing shot of towns such as Poseyville and Helper, before heading back onto the road. Small-town boy though he was, he clearly preferred the lures of city life. It was in cities—first Chicago and then, from 1952 until his death, San Francisco—that he chose to live, and it was in cities, from El Paso to Nashville, from New Orleans to New York, and most especially in his two adopted home towns, that Charles Cushman clearly loved to explore. Cushman was no social documentarian. From his point of view, his itineraries of urban neighborhoods were likely dictated by a desire to seek "picturesque" quarters, places full of variety and visual interest (much as he sought the prettiest trees and the loveliest vistas when he was out on the road). But from our own perspective, his images are useful in that they provide a nearly matchless record of the working-class and poor urban neighborhoods that once bound the American downtown closely to its surrounding suburban ring. This urban middle ground—lying beyond the central business district but within the city limits—was, in most twentieth-century cities, precisely the area most susceptible to decline, abandonment, and redevelopment, and therefore hardest to recall from looking around today. Cushman's search for colorful street life and rich architectural detail led him into neighborhoods on the brink—communities held momentarily together by an all-purpose corner store or a particularly sociable front stoop—but places nonetheless threatened with survival. It is only in retrospect, after the urban-renewal era and after the widespread departure of industrial worksites from the central city, that we can judge just how great, in the 1940s and 1950s, that threat was.

The materials and styles varied from one city to the next, but across the nation Cushman's lens focused on the neighborhoods built to house the newly arrived, poorly trained working families whose labor fueled the American industrial revolution. Such neighborhoods typically sprang up close to ports and industrial facilities, where they offered easy access to work opportunities, and where their small, densely built housing units offered, in a crudely efficient economic calculus, both a savings to poor tenants and a potential windfall to landlords. At their simplest, as



Cushman showed in his haunting images of "[negro quarters](#)" in [Nashville](#), or [miners' housing](#) in [Johnstown](#), workers found shelter in little more than frame shacks, one room wide, built above the ground. In [El Paso](#) and [St. Louis](#) he



documented regional variants of the simplest forms of multi-unit housing: small two-story buildings with room for several apartments and, occasionally, a store or tavern below. In [Annapolis](#) he documented another common housing type for

poor city-dwellers: the rowhouse, once built for families of means but long ago left behind, often to be subdivided into separate apartments or rooms for rent. In the French Quarter of New Orleans, Cushman encountered a similarly aging and underinvested neighborhood whose architecture had long been preserved by neglect and, more recently, by law: here, since, 1937, one of the nation's first historic-district ordinances had turned a slum neighborhood into a time capsule—though as his photographs show (left and right), the quarter was not yet the well-touristed, carefully dressed-up setpiece that it would become (or as it was being represented, even at the time, in such fanciful reconstructions as Cushman found at the [Chicago Railroad Fair in 1948](#)).

In New York, where need was most extensive and land most expensive, the classic tenement had evolved in a much more substantial manner: a four- to six-story brick walkup with two-room units and shared toilets or privies. Late nineteenth-century housing laws had brought on the familiar "dumbbell" plan, which allowed a modicum of light to shine down onto the interior windows of the building, but even this reform, as Jacob Riis had demonstrated memorably, soon came to stand for squalor and meanness. While further changes in the New York housing laws required substantially improved tenements to be built after



1901, the pre-1901 buildings were left to stand as they were (and, in the case of many Lower East Side blocks, still are). Cushman's curiosity naturally took him to this most storied and most often depicted of New York's lower-class neighborhoods. By the time of his visits, the east side was considerably less crowded—and somewhat less heavily Jewish—than it had been in the days when Jacob Riis, John Sloan, and others depicted it on film and canvas. <sup>1</sup> Still Cushman found there, as of 1941, significant traces of the Jewish-immigrant neighborhood that it had once been (right). His picture of the [corner of Broome Street and Baruch Place](#) likewise reveals a city not much changed from fifty years earlier:

stores at the street level, crowded tenements above, no conceivable place for the open space that reformers had insisted was necessary for the health and moral welfare of slum-dwellers. Walking through nearby Chinatown, a year later (left), he showed a newer stage in the familiar American pattern of arrival-segregation-assimilation, as yet another immigrant population found



its way into the crowded quarters of lower Manhattan.

Chicago is the city that Cushman explored most deeply, albeit with some corresponding lack of geographical breadth. Rather than range across the countless distinctive neighborhoods of this sprawling metropolis, Cushman focused his energies on a few of



its best known quarters: in particular, the "Bronzeville" slums of the near South Side and the Maxwell Street market area, on the Near West-centers, respectively, of the African American and eastern European Jewish migrations of the early 1900s. The Chicago pictures truly document a lost world: unlike the streets that Cushman shot in lower Manhattan, the blocks that he walked in Chicago's so-called Black Belt would, in



great part, be soon destroyed as part of the realization of the 1947 plan for the reconstruction of a 35-block-long area around Michael Reese Hospital and the Illinois Institute of Technology. This area, which included such middle-class projects as Lake Meadows and Prairie Shores, also became home to great tracts of low-income housing such as Stateway Gardens and, further south, the infamous Robert Taylor Homes. Regardless of their target tenants, what almost all the south side projects of the 1950s and 1960s shared was a commitment to eradicating the sort of streetscape that Cushman had captured earlier in the same area: a streetscape of incrementally built, small-scale structures crowded side to side and fronting directly on the sidewalk; a place of front stoops, corner groceries, and cheap restaurants; of great poverty but nevertheless of the sort of steady activity and interaction that American planners and architects were determined to push away from the traditional streetfront.



The transformation of the near west side was less thoroughgoing, and Cushman managed to capture both old and, to a lesser extent, new. We see a row of old houses, on [Throop at Adams](#), that recall the burgeoning working-class city at the time of the 1886 Haymarket Riots—which in fact took place a few blocks east of here. Cushman's numerous scenes of the [open-air market on Maxwell](#) and [nearby sites](#) likewise show a world that functioned much as it had a half-century earlier, and the neighborhood's best-known institution—[Jane Addams' Hull-House](#)—still stood unshadowed by the modernist scenography of

the Chicago Circle campus of the University of Illinois, which began to rise around the settlement house in the early 1960s. Already, however, Cushman saw signs of change; in one of his few depictions of things to come, we see the new [Congress Street \(later Eisenhower\) Expressway](#) cutting a wide path through the neighborhood on its way downtown.

It is odd and, from the perspective represented here, a little disappointing, that Cushman did not do more with the neighborhoods of his subsequent home town of San Francisco. Certainly the volume of his photographs of that city is impressive, and the visual appeal of the views is, commensurate with the charm of the city, hard to criticize. But long after his first months there (and Cushman seems to have lived with a camera around his neck in the spring of 1952), the city's panoramic vistas continued to draw Cushman more than its street life did. For a lover of hilltop perspectives, Cushman could not, of course, have come to a better place. Though he lived in the Marina district (a low-lying neighborhood built on landfill east of the Golden Gate Bridge), Cushman never missed a chance to head to the top of the city's many hills: Russian, Potrero, Nob, and Telegraph, as well as the taller (and less developed) heights of Twin Peaks and Mount Davidson, on the western side of the city. From them he recorded views that we recognize from countless postcards and family-vacation albums: views of dense neighborhoods of stucco-and-frame flats and houses with commercial streets intermixed, and with the landmarks of Coit Tower or the Golden Gate or Bay bridge rising behind. It is a peculiarity (and a strength) of this city that the view across from Russian Hill to Telegraph Hill, or from the Marina south to Pacific Heights, changed hardly at all from the time of Cushman's first visits in the 1940s to the late 1960s. Thus, just as each of Cushman's many San Francisco panoramas reveals little in the way of the close detail of neighborhood life as we see it in Chicago, they are equally underwhelming, taken as a group, as documents of urban change over time. San Francisco was one of the few American cities in which the persistence of many inner-city neighborhoods owed itself not to people's unwillingness to reinvest in new uses for them, but to the fact they remained well-occupied and well-maintained long after their initial construction.



A different view of things might have been generated by a walk through the Western Addition, or the Mission, or South of Market—all neighborhoods that knew their share of poverty and that stood to be changed, to a greater or lesser degree, by urban renewal programs. Cushman either avoided or simply did not photograph these and other ordinary San Francisco neighborhoods from the same sidewalk perspective that he had favored in Chicago. His photograph of a badly faded storefront-and-flats building at 21st and Church streets in the Noe Valley neighborhood (left) gives us a little taste of how evocative his

street photography might have been here, had he chosen to scratch more deeply than the postcard image. It was not until he decided to find out just what was happening in the once ordinary shopping district of [Haight Street](#) (a curiosity that resulted in a charming, if to our eyes not exactly startling, set of photographs) that Cushman looked seriously at this city's famously eccentric street life.

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## Downtown

Cushman was a skilled photographer of architecture, and to him we owe some fine views of postwar American downtowns—some of them mentioned above in the discussion of urban "edges" and many others taken from within the streets of the downtowns themselves. His rendition of the classic view of lower Manhattan from the harbor (right), like his (much later) views of the Midtown skyline (left) and [Chicago's Michigan Avenue](#) tell us little that we do not already know about the development of the skyline of the central business district—except, perhaps, to emphasize, once again, how much they still reflected the prewar



period—but they are compelling pictures nevertheless. When he ventures to the fringes of the office district—as he does along [New York's South Street](#) or in [Boston's Quincy Market](#) (long before they were reconstructed as tourist attractions), or again on [Main Street in downtown Los Angeles](#) or along the [soon-to-be demolished waterfront blocks of St. Louis](#)—he reveals more about the forces that pushed the US's famed skyscrapers into existence. Here, under the shadows of those "proud and soaring things," as Louis Sullivan had called them, are the places where downtown began—places where goods were offloaded from docks and onto trucks and wagons, where small stores took advantage of the proximity of people and products to display their wares, and where low-cost hotels and apartments flourished, catering to single people on their way in, out, or down. Finally, Cushman provides us with a couple of glimpses (both, as it happens, from the same trip through the South) of

the zone where tawdry and proper met: the commercial district where the white-collar office tenants rubbed shoulders with tourists, weekend moviegoers, and the denizens of the wharves and the transient hotels. Two nighttime images—of [Atlanta's Peachtree Street](#) and [New Orleans' Canal Street](#)—are among the most visually striking of the collection. Further, they remind us of a time when businesses could count it worth their while to invest in extravagant neon signs to capture the eye of downtown customers after dark.

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## Suburbia

I mentioned earlier in this essay that Cushman possessed more of an eye for what had come before than for what lay in the future. At times, he appears to have avoided willfully certain signs of large-scale change, and the relative paucity in his work of images of the great suburban construction boom underway in the 1950s and 1960s seems evidence of that fact. At the same time, we have to face the fact that there was, even by 1938, nothing particularly new about suburbs, and that Cushman was from the start uninterested in photographing the existing suburban world that had already been widely developed first along passenger railroad lines, and later along intra-urban streetcar routes. America's "middle landscape," as it is sometimes called, held nowhere near the same attraction for this photographer as did either of its opposing poles: the inner-city and the countryside.

Ironically, Cushman's hilltop climbs in and around San Francisco actually yielded good information on the growth of postwar suburban development. Simply by turning outward—in the opposite direction of his beloved but familiar city—Cushman was able to document a dramatic stage in the development of San Francisco's Peninsula and Marin County suburbs. Looking south



from Bernal Heights in 1955, he showed the Bayshore Freeway (US 101) pushing its way past new development in Hunter's Point and Bayshore toward the industrial suburb of South San Francisco (right). South of Twin Peaks he found the movement outward from San Francisco's crowded center (but still within its corporate limits) to be well underway (left). To the south of the city, toward the new community of [Linda Mar](#) (later a part of the town of Pacifica) and to the north, in land being



prepared for the [Eichler housing developments of San Rafael](#), he gives us a taste of the sort of large-scale suburban home construction that we have come to associate with the period. Elsewhere, scattered images—taken in locations from [Los Angeles](#) to [Winnipeg](#)—document a bit of regional variation to the pattern, but in nowhere near the quantity that would make it useful to the student of postwar suburbanization.

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## What's Missing

To fault Cushman for "missing" anything in the course of his thirty years of camerawork would be absurd—he shot what he wanted to shoot, and in the process of satisfying his own curiosity about the world he produced a survey of the everyday, mid-century landscape that is perhaps as comprehensive as any produced by an American photographer—more so, probably, than any other body of color work. If we wish we could see, in his slides, more of one element or another of the changing American scene, we should do so mindful that what is there already has opened our eyes to countless scenes and ideas that we would not have noticed, but for Cushman's willingness to stop the car, take out the camera, and shoot.

That said, the viewer of this web site should be aware of its limitations for American landscape studies. One finds little, as I mentioned at the outset, of modern architecture and city planning. It does show up in an occasional neighborhood view—a newly built [Erich Mendelsohn house](#) in San Francisco's Pacific Heights, the "ultramodern" [Gidwitz house](#) in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood—as well as in a handful of photographs of architecturally significant new skyscrapers, such as Chicago's [Marina Towers](#) and the [United Nations Secretariat](#). The



exuberant world of the American roadside is largely missing here, outside of occasional interesting views: an ensemble of metallic teepees outside Birmingham, Alabama (right); [the Motel Inn](#) (sometimes cited as the first motel) in San Luis Obispo, California. Cushman never (apparently) took his camera into a number of important cities (among them, the nation's fourth and fifth largest at the time, Philadelphia and Detroit), and his interest in that broad region that soon became known as "the Sun Belt" was largely confined either to rural scenery or to remnant urban settings, rather than to the new forms of metropolitan growth that were beginning to prosper in the South and West during his photographic career.

Any single place in the mid-twentieth-century American landscape can be found documented in greater detail elsewhere than it is in the slides of Charles Cushman. But in no other single place that I know of does the sheer range of those places—across space, across time, across the intermeshed functional elements of city, suburb, and countryside—receive a fuller treatment than it does in these pictures. Charles Cushman's sure compositional eye (he rarely took two exposures of the same scene), his meticulous note-taking and, most strikingly of all, his early commitment to working in color at a time when "serious" documentary work was done in black-and-white, all make this long-undiscovered collection a rich trove that can be mined for many years to come. While one takes pleasure in examining these handsome images singly, the greatest reward comes from assembling them as a group—as they have been in this web site—and discovering in their totality a clearer picture of a place that we thought we knew: the United States, c. 1938-1969, a place close enough to touch, but forever just out of reach.

## Notes

See *Fourteenth Census Compendium*. 17th Assembly District figures and *1950 Census Tract Statistics*, v. 3, p. 85, 12th and 14th census district figures.

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