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Not Yet a Placeless Land
Tracking an Evolving American Geography
 By Wilbur Zelinsky

(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011. Pp. xvii, 356. Notes, references, index. \$28.95.)

Three cheers for Wilbur Zelinsky's monumental work *Not Yet a Placeless Land*. Even though the devoted regionalist in me would prefer the title *Never a Placeless Land*, this book is a magnificent achievement that definitively answers a question that haunts every student of the American scene: Is our cultural landscape becoming more unified or diversified, more seamless or various over time? The standard response has been quite simple: the landscape is becoming everywhere the same. Americans, it seems obvious, have always been leveling the land and bulldozing nature into a smooth expanse of look-alike freeways and interchangeable cities. No one has expressed this machine-in-the-garden assumption more cleverly than Daniel Boorstin, who in highlighting the American compulsion "to level times and places" declared simply that "the uniqueness of modern America would prove to be its ability to erase uniqueness" (*The Americans: The Democratic Experience*, 1973).

For Zelinsky, to his lasting credit, the story is far more nuanced and paradoxical. Throughout this important book, he brilliantly illuminates how Americans are gripped by contradictory impulses: to erase uniqueness at the same time that we crave it; to flatten the land at the same time that we yearn for uneven places of belonging. Labeling these opposing forces "the mashing vs. the sorting of America," Zelinsky analyzes the roots of this perplexing paradox more thoroughly than any scholar past or present. He carefully weighs the myriad manifestations of convergence and divergence in American history and also compares American spatial uniformity and diversity to that of other nations and cultures. This is an epic task, and Zelinsky accomplishes it and reaches a compelling conclusion with amazing grace, objectivity, and a lifetime of wisdom and empirical evidence at his disposal.

Covering a vast array of landscape items, Zelinsky's argument moves from the tangible world of count-

able physical features to the more abstract realm of cultural values and behavioral patterns. After launching his general argument in chapter one with the basic question, “Is the United States becoming a placeless land?” Zelinsky proceeds to evaluate three kinds of empirical evidence from various perspectives. In chapter two he surveys the American cultural landscape’s shifting appearance from the seventeenth to the early twenty-first centuries with a focus on the impact of marketing systems and transportation and communications technologies. His third chapter concentrates on built landscapes, from house types outward to cityscapes. Chapter four examines the emergence of “some forty-odd kinds of place-making items”—including theme parks, retirement communities, flea markets, and gambling casinos—as an unpredictable “medley of uniqueness” spawned by modernization (p. 155).

Zelinsky analyzes less tangible, though equally significant, cultural variables in his three concluding chapters. Chapter five considers a multitude of contemporary cultural variables—among them folklore, foodways, sports, music, and dance—and locates persistent, even increasing, territorial diversity in the crucial areas of language, religion, and politics. Chapter six explores the

highly speculative realm of region and regionalism and reaches cutting-edge conclusions about the various types of cultural regions, their significance, and phases of regional thought and consciousness. The final chapter recapitulates the book’s purpose and basic argument, carefully weighs the evidence for unity and diversity in the landscape, and reaches the utterly convincing conclusion that, in Zelinsky’s highlighted words, “ours is a land that is constantly becoming more uniform and more diverse at the same time” (p. 269, emphasis in original). To the book’s opening question, it is clear by the end that despite all of the forces that level the land, there remains a “riotous profusion” of quirky places, local movements, and desire for spatial distinctiveness that makes our country “ever more placeful” and guarantees that “the American world is not flat” (pp. 265, 269).

For these and many other reasons, *Not Yet a Placeless Land* is a wise and wonderful book, a fitting capstone to a powerful life’s work. It is a monumental achievement and necessary reading for every student of the American scene and landscape.

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