

The meaning of the land in American society

Land is the basic commodity and the basis of economic value in any community. Harvey Molotch in his article "The City as a Growth Machine" (1976) argues that a city or locality is an aggregate of "land-based interests." Each landowner or person with an interest in the prospective use of a given piece of land has in mind a certain future for that parcel which is linked somehow with his/her own well-being. In any locality, there will eventually be an emergence of concern for an aggregate of parcels; that is, people will begin to see that their future is bound to the future of the larger area; that their future enjoyment of financial or other benefits flowing from their particular parcel will derive from the future uses of other parcels in the community.

Each community, then, is a mosaic of competing land interests capable of strategic coalition and action. Local government becomes the arena in which land use interest groups compete for public money and attempt to mold those decisions that will determine the land use outcomes in their community. At a broader level, communities compete with one another to gain the "preconditions" of growth - infrastructure investments and regulatory decisions that make their community attractive to various types of economic growth. Thus land and how it is used become the basis for economic growth and development in communities of all sizes.

Land uses affect people's "mental map" of their community. In other words, the ways in which land is used and the physical arrangement of these uses directly shape the mental map we develop and indirectly affect our definitions of the desirability of our community as a place to live and work. These mental maps come to define the essential nature of the community, regardless of how accurately they reflect the actual configuration of community activities. For example, Pittsburgh is its steel factories belching smoke against the sky and Aspen is its pristine ski slopes in the heart of the natural beauty of the Rockies. A community is defined both physically and perceptually, and our perceptions/definitions of reality can shape how we "see" and interact with that reality.

It is important to understand that a land use decision on one parcel has consequences for all other parcels in the community. Land uses are interlocking. Although our system of private ownership of particular parcels of land would suggest that land parcels are discrete, this is not so. A community's land is a seamless fabric of interdependent natural systems. Land uses several miles away can affect the economic and noneconomic value of my parcel due to water run-off, soil erosion, contamination of the aquifer, or simply the change in the overall nature of land use in my community. Therefore, every land use decision in a community has implications for all others holding land interests in that locality.

Many argue that the "value" of land is equal to the economic and noneconomic (current and prospective) uses of each parcel. It is relatively simple to attach a dollar value to the current and prospective economic uses of land (e.g., agricultural, residential, industrial, commercial, etc.). However, it is very difficult, if not impossible,

to assign a dollar value to current and prospective noneconomic uses of land (e.g., catchment basin for rainfall, feeder for aquifer, beautiful scenery). Indeed, some would argue that it is absurd to even talk about noneconomic values because these cannot be traded in the marketplace. The many permutations of the meaning of the “value” of land is at the heart of land use conflicts for this means that there is no single “right” choice in land use decisions, since each alternative is grounded in each person’s value hierarchy (what is right and important to me) and belief system (e.g., I have an absolute right to use my land in any way I desire). As growth occurs in a community, the range of options or alternatives for capturing the “value” of my land narrows, and this may lead to a shift in the meaning of my land in my personal value hierarchy.

From another perspective, the essential struggle in land use decisions is the conflict between individual actions and their social consequences. Garret Hardin in his seminal article “The Tragedy of the Commons” (1968) presents the concept of “misdirecting social systems” which provides insight into the difficulties inherent in land use decisions. In a misdirecting social system, values and normative expectations lead individuals to pursue behaviors that eventually destroy the underlying worth of the goal being pursued.

This is easily seen in an agricultural area that is undergoing residential growth. In this situation, the range of options or alternative that I have for using my farm to achieve my desired goals (e.g., make a profit, sustain a family legacy, diversify my crops or livestock) begin to narrow because of the land use choices on adjacent properties. In effect, each parcel of land transformed from agricultural to residential use limits the range of options that I have in operating my farm. Moreover, there is likely to be a threshold beyond which continued agricultural use is no longer possible because there is so much built environment that typical agricultural practices are prohibited. For example, dairy farms use sewage lagoons to manage the water quality effects of their herds. Periodically, the lagoons are drained and the biologically processed waste is spread as a fertilizer on fields. In urbanizing dairy-dependent communities across the nation, dairy farmers face considerable objections, and in some cases lawsuits, because of residential neighbors’ objections to this practice.

Finally, how we use our land shapes our understanding of who and what we are as a community. Land use is a physical embodiment of the symbolic meaning of this place. Land use issues also capture our love/hate relationship with growth and change. As rumors begin to fly in any community about what might happen to a parcel of land, people begin to define the meaning of the possible change for themselves, their families, and their community. Is the proposed change another nail in the coffin of our community identity? Does the proposed change signal another step into a better future? Will the proposed change destroy or damage our environment? At their heart, the answers to these questions are drawn from our personal and community values; the standards against which we judge right or wrong, good or bad, preferred or not preferred. Thus, every citizen, thinking about or observing the same land use change will arrive at a different assessment of the impact of the change on the community.

Meaning of the land in the film

This film illustrates some key themes that challenge the viewer to think differently about our simplistic “greedy developer” vs. “tree-hugging environmentalist” approach to framing land use conflicts.

- I. The same parcel of land is imbued with different meanings and invokes different values. Intuitively, most of us understand this but we still believe that our meanings, our values on the land are the only or at least the best ones. This is captured so powerfully when Jack Kain comments that what he wants to do in building his new car lot is “to make the field look better.”
- II. Our sense of place - the nature of the community and how the parts of the community fit together - emerges from land use patterns and how these have changed or persisted over time. In rural communities, directions are based on land relationships. For example, people will say, “Go about a quarter of a mile and turn left at Joe Blow’s place and then go on down to Tom Brown’s place and turn right.” Ironically, it doesn’t matter if Joe Blow’s family sold that land years ago, in the social landscape of this community, this land will always be viewed in this way. Similarly, when private lanes are adopted into a county road system or E-911 systems are established, roads are often given place names that represent the family that has lived the longest in the area, e.g., Greg Pitman Lane, Tom Beecher Road.
- III. Our understanding of who we are and our place in the social world is shaped by our relationship to the land. Owning land/property has always been and remains a core component of “the American dream.” Owning your first home is a major milestone in one’s life, and moving to more and more desirable property is a symbol of social advancement.
- IV. The land is the physical game board or the field of action on which conflicts among classes and interest groups over the meaning of community and over progress play out. As a result of these conflicts, we shape the physical landscape and its sociocultural meaning. We do this by imposing our particular visions of what is desirable, preferred, good on the landscape, so that it embodies these meanings. Thus: “One man’s sprawl is another man’s progress/development.” While the land has always been a vehicle for economic success and the basis for class conflict, what has changed over time is how we frame the meaning of land within the context of class conflict
- V. The framing of land use conflicts within the context of a class struggle poses the question: Is it possible to “negotiate” a land use conflict? Is this an issue so emotional, so psychologically powerful, so elemental to our understanding of who we are that it is impossible to find “common ground”? What does it take to identify common ground and how do we encourage the parties to negotiate on this issue?
- VI. As one of the participants in the film comments, the struggle to save the land goes on forever. And this is inevitable, because this is a conflict in which every battle lost is actually losing the war for that particular parcel of land. Once converted to urban uses, land does not return to its natural state.

