

J B Jackson

# Urban Circumstances



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Editor: Mildred Friedman  
Graphic Designer:  
Robert Jensen  
Graphic Design Assistant:  
Jeffrey Cohen  
Editorial Assistant:  
Linda Krenzin

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photographs by  
Stuart Klipper  
and John Schott

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## Editor's Notes

John Brinckerhoff Jackson often approaches a topic by defining it linguistically, searching out its derivation, its essence. In so doing he regularly reveals what for many reasons may have been overlooked or obscured by the strata of time. In unearthing the origins of the term "vernacular" in his essay "Urban Circumstances," Jackson once again brings to light, with an all-too-rare acuity, ideas and attitudes that historically have had enormous impact on the evolution of this country's landscape.

Here and in his most recent book, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (Yale University Press, 1984), Jackson does not examine the picturesque, but searches out those aspects of nature not seen or understood by most environmentalist writers. His unique contemporary view of the American landscape contrasts radically with the more widely-held romantic one of man as the observer and protector of a vast wilderness. Instead Jackson looks at man's intercessions into nature: the farms, small communities, highways and

cities that are our living places. Jackson comments, "The older I grow and the longer I look at landscapes and seek to understand them, the more convinced I am that their beauty is not simply an aspect but their very essence, and that that beauty derives from the human presence." It is "the image of our common humanity" he looks for in his ongoing analysis of American space.

Jackson was an inspired professor of landscape history for many years at Harvard and the University of California, Berkeley. Since his retirement from teaching his following has grown outside academe through his lectures and published writings. This issue of *Design Quarterly* continues Jackson's researches into the humanistic landscape and opens up new areas of concern to all who care deeply about the American environment.

The author has provided several photographs to illustrate his essay. In addition, we include images by the photographers Stuart Klipper and John Schott. Their distinctive works make visible what Jackson has brought to the mind's eye.

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**A** MERICANS have had the unique fortune of living in a landscape that reflects a single purpose, a monolithic plan. The grid with its national as well as its local or urban versions is not so much a practical scheme for organizing space in a uniform and efficient manner as it is a way of creating an infinite number of small holdings, individual spaces essential not only for physical survival but for establishing identity. We imagine our landscape as a wonderfully harmonious composition of thousands upon thousands of such rectangular spaces: a green and undulating landscape of farms and small white villages and well-defined fields with a horizon of forested hills. The houses capture our attention because they are the focal points of all the private, self-sufficient spaces. They nestle among trees and shadows at half-mile intervals, like brooding hens rejoicing in security and domestic isolation. It may well be out of keeping with the times, but our prototypal American landscape is as beautiful as any—healthy and humane and productive of many values. If it has blemishes, if neglect and over exploitation have left marks on its face, these are no part of its essence, they derive from elsewhere, from the city. Our landscape, so it seems to us, is our own in a special sense: it was deliberately created for us as we were some two hundred years ago, meant for our way of life.

Yet some quirk in our national character, some misreading of our history, causes many of us to celebrate one aspect, and one aspect only, of that landscape—the autonomous, self-sufficient, individual unit: the solitary house, the isolated farm or village, the lonely monument; the lonely independent hero. We minimize when we cannot ignore the role played by cities and towns and work communities in the formation and enrichment of our landscape. We forget that Jamestown and Plymouth came before the pioneer farm or the log cabin in the forest; that interdependence in America came before Independence. I need hardly point out how this vision of America as a society dedicated to rural and small town self-sufficiency prevails in much of our popular art and

