

## A PLACE IN THE COUNTRY: RURAL DWELLINGS AND THE PARADOX OF RURALITY

*Mike Madison\**

The alluvial fan of Putah Creek comprises some forty thousand acres of flat land in the lower West Side of the Sacramento Valley. The landscape is a handsome one, prosperous and orderly, nearly entirely devoted to farming. Hardly a person who lives in the region has not at some time entertained the thought of buying some land and building a place in the country. The idea seems innocuous enough, and yet one who pursues it quickly becomes entangled in a web of historical, economic, environmental, architectural, legal and ethical issues. My purpose in this essay is to untangle some of those relationships, and to show how a confused notion of urbanity in nearby towns affects the fate of the rural countryside.

My approach is oblique. What I propose is to describe seven houses; four are rural and three are urban; two no longer exist; one is only imagined. By placing each house in its context, I hope to illuminate some of the social issues that attach to rural housing. The data on which these remarks are based were not collected in the usual scholarly way—stirring up dust in the archives. I started out doing farm work along Putah Creek in the 1950's, picking tomatoes in the fields around Davis and pitting apricots in the fruit drying yards near Winters. Farming along the creek became my vocation. In the seasons when farm work is slow, I purchase abandoned rural buildings, dismantle them and sell the used lumber, or build barns or sheds from the recycled materials. There is not a house or barn in the district that I have not studied with a critical eye toward its architectural merits, its social history, and its value as salvage. And so my data derive from first hand observation, and from conversations with old timers.

### ONE: NINETEENTH CENTURY RURAL MANSION

The traveler on rural roads in the district will from time to time come across a nineteenth century mansion set at the edge of a field. There are more than a dozen of these surviving in the district. Perhaps the first thing that one notices is that these are big houses, of four or five thousand square feet. Ceilings of twelve to sixteen feet high, which

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helped cool the interior in summer, make for a tall two-story house. A prosperous farm needed a house this big. Families were large and often augmented by guests. Passage on muddy roads in winter was a slow business, and travelers would be put up for the night in farmhouses that served as seasonal hotels. The house also served for schooling, musical performances, dances, and religious services, and for conducting the business of the farm.

The architectural styles of rural houses from this era are national styles (Greek Revival, Queen Anne, Italianate), reflecting whatever was current in Sacramento or San Francisco, or what was to be seen in the magazines. Although the national styles that were used were not particularly well suited to the climate, no local, vernacular architectural style developed.

A house is a reflection of social structure, and the old mansions of the district reflect a more hierarchical society than the present one. The traveler approaching a nineteenth century mansion in the country passes through a series of increasing intimacies (or for a stranger, increasing trespasses); from the public road to the private drive, to the front yard, perhaps passing through a gate in a low fence, to the steps, then ascending to the porch, across the porch, over the threshold past the massive front door with its impressive hardware, into a foyer, to the public rooms (living room, dining room) to the private rooms. Because the house was usually built on high ground, the approach entailed a slight ascent at each stage. The many stages of this transition permitted fine social distinctions. One guest might be admitted to the porch, but not across the threshold; another less privileged might state his business from the base of the porch stairs, not feeling entitled to ascend.

An important social function of the private house is that it provides the opportunity to offer hospitality, one aspect of which is the conspicuous abandonment of defenses. The purpose of the brass bolts and locks of the massive front door was not to keep uninvited people out-one could easily enough gain entry by a flimsy side door or back door-but to allow for their symbolic breaching as a mark of hospitality.

The fine old nineteenth century manor houses that persist in the district are not easily interpreted as landscape elements. At the time they were built, they must have had a well understood social significance, but decades have passed and the houses have gradually lost their context. What did their contemporaries make of the elaborate encrustation with architectural ornament? Was it seen as refined, or beautiful, or ostentatious, or more sympathetically, as architectural exuberance? We do not know. But human nature does not change so much in a century or two, and it seems likely that the principal symbolic role of the big house was a display of the prosperity and success of the farmer.

## TWO: NINETEENTH CENTURY FARM WORKER'S SHACK

It would be an error to think that the old mansions that still survive typify the nineteenth century housing of the district. They have survived because they were well built of good materials, and because they were too valuable to be allowed to perish. But the majority of houses were much humbler in scale and in materials, and most of them are gone. So we see now a landscape from which the commonest elements have been removed and the exceptional ones remain. Each mansion was the center of a community of workers, who lived nearby in simple dwellings, or shacks, or tents. Travel on foot or horseback was slow, and the farm workers had to live on the farm. Large crews were required, for farming was hardly mechanized and consequently was extremely labor intensive. By 1870 the Jerome Davis farm in Davis had seventy-five full time workers and considerably more seasonal workers. Nothing remains of those workers' houses.

I once dismantled a one hundred-twenty year old farm worker's house that was to be demolished. It was a simple building of a few hundred square feet, framed in fir, on a redwood foundation sitting directly on the ground, with rough redwood one-by-twelve boards nailed up vertically for siding, and no interior finish to the walls. There were two rooms, one with a wood-burning iron stove provided with a clay flue. The north wall of the north room had been papered with Chinese newspapers printed in Stockton, California in 1886. The building had been occupied by a Chinese tenant farmer who grew fresh market produce on ten acres of leased land. More recently Mexican workers had occupied it, one of whom had penciled a calendar on the wall to track his hours of work:

L	M	M	J	V	S	D
		13	12	14	13½	7½
15	12½	14	14	12	13	8
13½	11	15				

Sunday was the day of rest, on which he worked only eight hours. An immense cottonwood tree shaded the house, and framed an outdoor living space, (where, presumably, a privy also once stood). Primitive dwellings of this type were once common throughout the district, either isolated, or clustered near the big manor houses, but hardly any remain.

## THREE: HOUSE IN TOWN, 1910

There are two towns in the district: Winters, near the base of the mountains, and Davis, fourteen miles downstream on the creek. Winters is only seventy feet higher in elevation than Davis, indicating the remarkable flatness of the land, sloping about five feet to the mile. By 1910,

each town had a business district and a residential district with a grid of orthogonal streets, each block divided by an unpaved alley. Residential lots were fifty by one hundred or one-hundred-twenty feet.

The typical town house of that era was a simple wood-frame structure of six- or seven-hundred square feet. Often the house had no closets, for the owners had little to put in a closet. People had few possessions, and material culture was simple. Much of daily life was enacted on the front porch, where one might enjoy the evening breeze, and visit with neighbors passing by on foot. Such a house cost about one year's salary of an average worker.

In 1910 the majority of Americans still lived on farms, and a rural orientation was a dominant feature of the culture. The residential neighborhood of the town was essentially a compressed rural landscape. The town house was a farm house placed on an eighth of an acre instead of one-hundred-sixty acres. Architecturally, the house made no acknowledgement of its neighbors. Windows were placed on all sides, without regard to a neighbor's window a few feet away.

When the houses were small in relation to the size of the lots, and when architecture was relatively homogeneous, the resulting landscape of the town was congenial despite the absence of truly urban values or an urban culture. In later decades, when houses were larger and architects less modest, some bizarre neighborhoods were created. What is one to make of a pseudo-Virginia colonial adjacent to a Spanish hacienda adjacent to a Cape Cod saltbox adjacent to an Arizona ranch complete with trucked-in boulders and a bleached cow skull? The spectator is expected to suspend his disbelief, and to imagine each house as if it were solitary, with an appropriate landscape extending to the horizon. This type of neighborhood in town is a denial of urbanity; rather, it is descended from the myth of the pioneer with his isolated rural homestead.

#### FOUR: RURAL FARMSTEAD, 1952

There used to be a farmstead on county road 31 with a house built about 1952. The house was long and low, as was the style of that time. The foundation was a concrete slab on grade, rather than a wood floor raised over a crawl space as in older buildings. Eight-foot ceilings replaced the fourteen footers of an earlier time, reflecting the adoption of four by eight feet as a standard size for sheet goods (drywall and plywood) in the 1940's. I believe that the four-by-eight standard was a blunder; three-by-nine would have made for less claustrophobic buildings and easier handling of materials. The fine distinctions of transition from public to private space that typified the nineteenth century mansions had nearly disappeared here; one stepped directly from the driveway into the living room. In part this reflects the evolution of a more egalitarian and

less formal society; in part it reflects a loss of architectural subtlety. By the 1950's, the contrast between mansion and shanty was greatly attenuated, and the farm owner's house did not much differ from the houses of his workers.

In the early 1960s, the place burned to the ground and was abandoned. By 1980, a few charred timbers and rusted pipes remained standing over the old foundation, and a thicket of feral rose bushes covered what had once been the yard. In the remains of the garage sat the burnt hulk of a '53 Cadillac, its chromium dental work grinning through the brambles. One day men showed up with heavy machinery, such as loaders and excavators and trucks, and they scooped up the remains of the homestead-foundations, Cadillac, roses, and all-and hauled it away. By the next season, the site was incorporated into the surrounding field, with no evidence left that there had ever been a home there.

The disappearance of that farmstead was part of the depopulation of the rural district that occurred between 1940 and 1990. Farming became mechanized, thus fewer workers were needed. Mechanization of tillage and cultivation using tractor-drawn implements was common by the 1920's; mechanization of harvesting (tomatoes, walnuts, almonds, and prunes) came in the 1970's. At the same time, roads were improved, automobiles became inexpensive and widely available, and the farmer, his family, and the workers, could choose to live in town. Many farmsteads were abandoned or torn down.

There is another reason why the burned-out homestead was not rebuilt; the surrounding land is now under the control of a large farming corporation that farms thousands of acres in the district. The corporate farm embraces the industrial model of farming, in which farming is reckoned to be simply a type of manufacturing, and in which fossil fuel and pesticides are substituted for experience and judgment. It is a farmerless type of farming. From time to time a crew of workers will show up with equipment and carry out some operation, and then leave. But you could watch that field every day for a year and never say, "Ah, there's the farmer," because there isn't one; and without a farmer, there is no need for a farmstead.

#### TRACT HOUSE IN TOWN, 1999

In 1910, a typical single family dwelling had two bedrooms and one bath, totaling an area of 600 square feet. By 1950, three bedrooms and a thousand square feet were the norm. By 1970, three bedrooms, two baths, and 1500 square feet typified new housing. In 1999, a new house has four to five bedrooms, three baths, a three car garage, and 3000 square feet of living space. Contrary to the growing size of houses, families are smaller than they were a century ago.

In part, people need larger houses because they have more stuff. During the twentieth century the manufacture and distribution of goods became enormously efficient. The price of virtually all goods, measured in constant terms, declined, and an increment of labor now buys far more than it once did. Additionally, many new kinds of goods have been invented: computers, televisions, microwave ovens, scuba gear, jet skis, many other things unheard of a generation ago are now considered necessary.

Also true is that daily life has increasingly moved indoors. The aboriginal inhabitants of the district lived outside and entered their huts only to sleep or wait out stormy weather. But now even children are seldom outdoors. Indoor life has been made more attractive and comfortable with heating, air conditioning, good lighting, refrigeration, and recorded music. This might justify a need for more interior space. In addition, the outside world has steadily been degraded. Where one might once have sat on the porch of a summer's evening, listening to the rustling of the leaves in the Delta breeze, one now is oppressed by booming music from passing cars, roaring gasoline engines, and the sound of sirens. The gentle scratch of a bamboo rake has been replaced by the insane scream of a leaf blower. Outdoors is not what it used to be; people now take refuge in their homes.

More than either of these, the chief determinant of the size of houses is the price of land. When land is expensive, builders put up big houses. If a bare lot cost \$100,000, and if building a house costs \$100 per square foot, then one could build a 600 square foot house for \$160,000 (\$100,000 for the lot plus \$60,000 for the house). Doubling the size of the house to 1200 square feet makes a cost of \$220,000 (\$100,000 for the lot plus \$120,000 for the house). The result is that one can get twice as much house (1200 instead of 600 square feet) for only a 37% increase in the total price. This is an irresistible economic force. Empirically, the total cost of the house plus the lot will not drop below two and one half times the cost of the lot. So if a lot sells for \$125,000, which is a typical low-end price today, the finished house will not be less than \$312,000. The house one gets for \$312,000 will be big and fancy, not small and humble.

Expensive, detached, single-family dwellings are bought by expensive, detached, single families. The father's an attorney, the mother's a doctor, they have 1.5 children and 3.2 automobiles. The town house of 1910 cost about one year's salary of an average worker; the average new house in Davis today costs about seven years salary of an average worker. The self-employed artist, the farm-worker with five children, and the single mother are squeezed out of the picture.

In modern tract housing, the lots are small and the houses are large, built fully to the legal setback, so that each house seems to be staring

furiously, eyeball to eyeball, at its neighbor only a few feet away. Big houses, so close together, seem confrontational. Yet the developers are unwilling to take the obvious next step of a shared common wall and a row of townhouses. In Spain or Morocco, the problem is solved by using a fundamentally different notion of a house. Instead of outward looking, it is introspective; it turns its back to its neighbors and looks into its own interior courtyard. The courtyard, with its trickling fountain, potted lemon trees, drying laundry, and bicycle leaning against a wall, is an attractive space, outdoors, and yet private and protected from the chaos of the streets. This style of housing would be entirely appropriate in this region, more so than what we have, but real estate developers and the bankers who back them are notorious for their conservatism and lack of imagination, so Mediterranean housing has not been attempted here. It is also true that the free-standing house is an icon of the pioneer homestead. The tract house, however far it may be from the pioneer's cabin, is still a remnant of a deeply ingrained rural tradition.

Why is it that an eighth of an acre lot in town costs \$125,000? A developer buys forty acres of farmland near town at farmland prices (\$5,000 per acre) and sits on it for ten years until finally permission to develop it is granted. He pays for utilities and paving, and after the lots are sold, he walks off with twenty million dollars in his pocket. This is what motivates the developer—he wants to grab his twenty million and clear out. He can charge the prices that he does because demand for lots exceeds the supply. The city implements a policy of limiting growth, which makes the city more desirable, and drives up prices even further. City officials, who are charged with fiscal responsibility, are not opposed to a community of large, expensive houses, which generate tax revenues greater than their costs to the city.

As an alternative, a nonprofit organization could buy the farmland and subdivide it, and taking precautions to discourage speculators, could sell those lots for \$40,000 instead of \$125,000. Figuring in the ratio of two and a half to one, houses could be sold at \$100,000 rather than \$312,000. Under this scenario, development of new lands could sustain a more pluralistic society than what we have. The difference of \$85,000 in the market price versus not-for-profit price of a lot is a measure of the real estate developer's greed.

#### SIX: URBAN FLAT, 2001

There is a handsome building, nestled between similar neighboring buildings, that has two levels of underground parking and six stories above ground. The ground level has space for businesses, while the upper floors are residential flats. The residents of these flats are not troubled with maintaining a yard, nor do they need to drive everywhere—shops and

restaurants are within easy walking distance. This building exists only in the imagination. It has not been built in Winters or Davis because it is a truly urban building in an urban neighborhood, and urban culture does not exist in these towns.

A town does not suddenly become a city by reaching a certain level of population. There are cities in Greece and Italy of only a thousand people. What makes them cities is the architecture, the culture, and the prizing of sociability over materialism. If we look at successful small cities around the country, those that are vibrant and interesting and sought-after places to live, such as Cambridge, Georgetown, Greenwich Village, we notice three traits that they share. The first is a high population density, of about one hundred dwelling units per acre (more than ten times the density of Davis and Winters). This is achieved by a grid system of streets with attached buildings of five or six stories, not so high as to be intimidating or to create the effect of urban canyons. The second feature is a mixed used zoning, so that the ground floors of the buildings are for businesses, and the upper floors are residential. The third feature is hostility to the automobile. Traffic is slow, parking is difficult to find and extremely expensive. Conversely, public transportation is effective.

The small town mindset rejects all of these notions. Widely spaced detached single family homes are considered to be almost the only suitable housing, commercial zoning is scrupulously separated from residential, and the automobile is never offended. An obvious result is suburban sprawl. A less obvious result is housing that is unsuited to the needs of a diverse populace. Single family tract housing is best suited to traditional families with children. There are, however, many non-traditional families, older couples whose children have left home, single people, and childless couples for whom a single family house is not the best housing. An urban flat from which one can walk to shops and restaurants, and which relieves one of the burden of maintaining a yard and a car, is more desirable for many people.

In both Davis and Winters, growth is controversial, but there seems to be agreement that an increase in population also requires moving the edge of town further out into the countryside. Indeed, real estate developers who hold title to lands on the periphery of town are impatient for the chance to finally make their millions. But the linkage of population growth with expansion of the city limits is a false notion and should be rejected. It comes from a failure to conceive of any other kind of housing than that of the rural tradition that has evolved into modern tract housing. It is time to give that up and adopt urban values. The fortified medieval town had a perimeter defined by the city wall, and all growth took place within that boundary. Similarly, Davis or Winters could define its perimeter with a greenbelt and declare, "This is it. This is the edge of town. Forever more." Growth of the urban population would be

allowed by the same mechanisms that operated in medieval towns: by increasing density. The result would inescapably be superior to continuing suburban sprawl, no matter how much the populations of the towns grew. Growth restricted by area but not the number of citizens would force a diversification of building styles that would better serve the needs of the citizens than what exists now. Such a limitation of growth would protect farmland that currently is vulnerable to urbanization.

#### SEVEN: A PLACE IN THE COUNTRY, 2001

When an eighth-of-an-acre lot in town sells for nearly the same price as forty acres of farmland a few miles out of town, many buyers looking for a home site will choose the farmland. The agricultural economy is depressed, and the farm value of rural land is low compared to its speculative value and its value as a place to build a house. Farm land is being sold as forty acre building lots. I saw an advertisement recently for a plot of rural land: "Ninety-acre home site, secluded, great views, easy commute." No mention was made of the farming potential of the land. Is it rice ground or orchard ground? Does it have district water or its own wells? The farm's value as a place to build a house had eclipsed its agricultural value.

In the last ten years the majority of farmland sold in the district has been sold to non-farmers. Doctors, professors, lawyers, engineers, and businessmen are the new owners. They have no interest in farming; they just want a place to build a big house unrestrained by the tight regulation of city building, and perhaps to add a tennis court and a pool and a barn with a couple of horses. They expect that some tenant farmer will be interested in farming the remainder of the land, and usually they can find someone. Typically, it is the biggest corporate farms that are interested in picking up such leases.

One consequence is that large, suburban-esque houses are being built throughout the district. They are obviously not working farmsteads, and there is something fraudulent about them. The architecture bears no meaningful relationship either to the land or to the community or to the history of the region. Indeed, there is a spate of architects eager to flaunt their outrageousness. A slate roof imported from China? Why not? There is now one such roof in the district. Another consequence is that land is being farmed by corporate tenants who, on the average, embrace industrial practices of farming, which is to say, heavy use of herbicides and fossil fuels.

When the wealthy townsman builds his place in the country, he inadvertently harms the young man or woman with few assets who wishes to become a farmer. What is a young farmer to do? When a parcel of rural land has been encumbered with a \$600,000 house, no would-be farmer

can afford it. The extravagant house has alienated the farmland from the farmer. It is possible for the young farmer to lease the arable part of the parcel from the wealthy owner. So the farmer lives in town, commutes to his fields, and on the road he passes the rich owner, who lives on the farm, and commutes to his office in town. This is not a good situation. To farm well, one must follow practices that are unprofitable in the short term, but which enhance the health of the land in the long term. It would take an unusual degree of maturity for the young farmer to farm well on land that he does not own simply because it is the righteous thing to do. One could not blame him for cutting some corners, and farming badly, if he has no assurance that the land will be available to him for years to come.

#### THE PARADOX OF RURALITY

There is a phenomenon we might call the paradox of rurality. It is a cousin to the paradox of wilderness, which goes like this: We value wilderness for the absence of humans and their artifacts. By setting foot in the wilderness, we contaminate it, and lessen it. The dream of wilderness is more pure than the wilderness itself, which is disturbed by our presence. Surely, Yosemite Valley with fifty-thousand tourists is not a wild place. Similarly, people are attracted to the rural countryside by the deep beauty of its landscape, its orderliness, the abundance of its fields, the prosperity of its orchards, and by the purposefulness of its workers. But, when the townsman builds a country house he has sure enough begun to ruin the countryside that attracted him. For he has no real business being there, his house is non-organic to the landscape, and when dozens of such houses are scattered through the countryside, the rural district loses its authenticity, its architectural coherence, and its harmony of purpose. It becomes a diluted suburbia. Several times a year I am asked with great earnestness by someone or other if I wouldn't sell them just an acre on one corner of my farm so that they could build a country house. They fail utterly to understand that doing so, multiplied many times over, would destroy what attracted them in the first place.

We recognize the value of wild lands. The most spectacular are preserved as national parks, and a variety of agencies preserve other, subtler tracts of wilderness. Similarly, we recognize the value of historic buildings and neighborhoods, and many of these are protected by law from thoughtless alteration. The agrarian landscape, however appealing, is hardly protected. Zoning codes, building codes, and conservation easements offer slight protection to the rural countryside, but the codes are full of holes, and variances are commonly granted.

The rural lands of the Great Valley of California are vulnerable on two fronts. One is the ever increasing spread of cities and towns by the

addition of housing tracts and the businesses that serve them. A farm where I lived in 1954 was three miles from Davis; now it's in the city limits. I have tried in this essay to make the case that suburban sprawl is not so much a matter of population growth as it is of the failure to adopt truly urban values and the architecture appropriate to them. Such a change can be forced by a city government with a sense of what a city should be and the courage to carry out that vision, or by an imaginative entrepreneur.

The second front on which the rural lands are vulnerable is the transfer of rural land, parcel by parcel, from farmers to non-farmers. This wreaks a change on the landscape that undermines its authenticity. If we want to see where this course leads over time, we need only look to the Santa Clara Valley, Orange County, or Santa Rosa, each of which has lost its rural charm when the agrarian culture was overwhelmed by non-farming immigrants who wanted to live in such a beautiful place. The Napa valley is far along this pathway as well, with its increasing architectural chaos from the houses of wealthy and thoughtless immigrants who want to see the lovely view, but don't stop to think of what they are doing to everyone else's view when they erect their mansion on a hilltop.

It is not obvious how the rural lands can be protected from this kind of transformation. Formation of a Farmlands Commission, analogous to the Coastal Commission or to the commissions that oversee the preservation of historic neighborhoods, might be possible. Such a commission would have a regional rather than a local scope, and like the Coastal Commission, would have broad powers to regulate building and development within its jurisdiction. Similar farmland commissions operate effectively in Denmark and Sweden, but the exaggerated notion of personal freedom engrained in our culture would be, at best, a nearly insurmountable obstacle.



MY FATHER'S CAMPING STOVE, UNUSED ON A TRIP TO  
BERRYESSA RESERVOIR

*Laurie Glover\**

High wind would have set the tent in constant motion,  
extinguished the stove's flame—it had been my father's.  
I fled indoors. The next day we went to the grave-  
yard of the town that was buried underwater.  
Past the headstones, horses jostled one another  
for our attention. The rows were like houses

(all of which, but a few, were burned, and those houses,  
jacked up on risers with who knows what commotion,  
moved who knows where, separated from the others,  
don't remake a town). I wept for my father,  
and also for all that lay under that water,  
knowing what it's like to have a year to grieve

ahead of loss and see it on the grave  
face. As it fades, I wonder what the mind houses:  
childhood's succession of days, playing in water,  
the slanting sunlight, ripples and trees in motion,  
fish in the green shade, finding veined stones and feathers,  
the wandering creek, the animals, calls to each other.

And the other days, going with Grandmother  
with coffee cans of garden flowers for the graves,  
did you know them? Or maybe that was your father,  
and you never went, instead stayed in the house,  
having decided at thirteen that emotion  
could be lived without. Before the rising water

covered it all, all the families' tears watered  
the sweet ground of the familiar, every mother,  
in square hat and white gloves, undertook the motions  
at that cemetery for the last time. The graves

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were emptied. The bones, really no more than houses  
we once occupied, were reburied. The fathers

were absent in their grief. Of all this, my father  
would have said that to stop the yearly floodwaters  
downstream was worth the price of the town—the houses,  
trees, orchards, a small price for progress. Another  
town will rise elsewhere, as when after gravel  
is dredged, the creek finds its bed, refines its motions.

Maybe so. Still, I've lost my father, others, their houses.  
With perhaps unnecessary emotion, I mourn  
for a grave under trees, the oblitative water.