

Seeking Common Ground

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Peter F. Cannavò, *The Working Landscape: Founding Preservation and the Politics of Place*, MIT Press, 2007.

Democracy has always been a work in progress. And no aspect of our democracy has required more careful management than the policies that distribute resources among Americans in the face of changing market forces. The early Congress tinkered continually with land distribution policies in an effort to shelter the settler somewhat from the economic and political pressures created by speculators and large plantation owners. Now, in a landscape of greater scarcity, the fight to protect the public interest against powerful economic interests has become especially urgent.

In *The Working Landscape*, Peter Cannavò looks at the modern American landscape shaped by technological and economic forces largely beyond the popular awareness. He examines the bitter stalemates between commercial and preservationist forces that create so much ill will yet accomplish relatively little, and he asks how we can do better. Cannavò joins his voice to those seeking a more successful collaboration among the forces that shape our landscape and thereby our lives. He claims inspiration from both the environmental justice and collaborative conservation movements, and his book celebrates the philosophy of both—and makes the reader want to celebrate them, too.

Cannavò begins with three detailed case studies: the Northwest logging standoff, the sprawl debate, and the rebuilding process at Ground Zero in Manhattan. In these three polarizing cases, Cannavò looks at the positions of both industry and environmental or preservationist groups and finds both intractable. He finds neither side concerned enough with the social welfare that democratic government is supposed to protect, and no democratic mechanisms to guard the social and economic well-being of local and regional populations affected by these issues and the debates surrounding them.

Cannavò sees instead an ill-natured contest between our impulse to build and exploit, and our impulse to preserve. Cannavò finds the representatives of industry, as well as many environmentalists working at the national level, to be tone deaf to social and economic issues at the local and regional level. He tries to envision the democratic mechanisms that would help us mediate between our important social attachments to places and our need to use resources for economic sustenance. He makes a strong case for elected regional government—ideally at the scale of a watershed—with local input. Although, the regional governments now in place show that this is far from a silver bullet, they definitely improve the monitoring of resources for public good within their jurisdictions.

In his depiction of logging in the Northwest forests, Cannavò highlights an overlooked constituency: local lumber workers, many of whom are following a way of life handed down for two or three generations in their families. They have both a strong

investment in the welfare of the forests and a healthy regard for the wonders of nature. These lumber workers were arguing, like the environmentalists, against the national or multinational corporations who sought logging rights in the Northwest forests. Cannavò asserts that the environmentalists, because of their insistence on the invalidity of all economic claims on land, failed to make allies of the lumber workers.

And at Ground Zero, where Cannavò details the long, frustrating rebuilding process to date, he finds that the strong, opposing interests of the Twin Towers developer, Larry Silverstein, and the grieving families of 9/11 victims allowed for little consideration of the needs of the neighborhood around the site. Cannavò argues convincingly that the social and economic concerns of the site's neighbors could have been a valuable mediating force in the planning and design process and would have yielded more successful final results.

Cannavò follows these studies with a discussion of the many forces of modern life and modern markets that have alienated people from the places they live and work and sucked them into the placeless flows of money and information that orbit the planet. Indeed, his condemnation of these forces, especially global capitalism, is so persuasive that one expects stronger remedies than the final chapters offer. However, human nature, and the political systems that human nature invents, have their limitations, and improvements come in small steps.

Cannavò's message could not be timelier. Indeed, one wishes that he had tailored his book to a more popular audience. During his case studies and the more jargon-laden theory that follows, Cannavò spends a little too much time shadowboxing current academic vogues. While this is understandable in a first nonfiction book based on a dissertation, it is likely to hinder the delivery of Cannavò's important message to readers who serve on the front lines of the battle to use natural resources for social good rather than the economic benefit of a limited few. His theoretical and philosophical argument often beautifully articulates his insights into the human attachment to place, but some of his arguments would benefit from grounding in the social science research now available that documents certain of the mysterious links between human psychology and the natural world or home environment. His arguments do, however, offer intriguing avenues of exploration for further research in this area.

As a planner, I found Cannavò's review of the causes of and solutions for sprawl familiar, though his list is very thorough and many of his suggestions are still gaining ground in the public awareness despite their longevity in academic and professional circles. Cannavò's celebration of Portland's Urban Growth Boundary seems premature given its death in a property-rights backlash. What may deserve more attention is the innovative structuring of taxes on property and real estate transactions to encourage urban density or help buy publicly owned land. Pittsburgh has applied the first method with some success, and innovative land banks around the country buy land to prevent development.

In his final chapters, Cannavò returns to his case studies to show the programs, policies, and adjustments in governmental structure that have helped to break the resource-wars stalemates by adding local input and regional oversights. Though the successes are small, and the obstacles as varied as human nature, the task Cannavò assigns us is critical. He would have us see how increasingly scarce resources, and the increasingly

obscure and market-controlled processes that distribute them, threaten the public interest and the success of democracy itself. We urgently need voices like Cannavò's to remind us where the public interest lies.