

A Visual Exploration into the Natural and Urban Landscapes of Colorado

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11/22/2024

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Abstract

This honors thesis aims to educate individuals on the Colorado landscape through the unique, personal lens of a landscape architect. Additionally, this honors thesis intends to be a personal archive and portfolio piece. The project includes explanations and examples of key landscape architecture terms such as landscape, natural landscapes, and urban landscapes, as well as an investigation into three case studies of urban and natural Colorado landscapes. The photo archive at the end serves as a reference as well as a personal portfolio.

Project overview

My honors thesis intends to educate individuals on the Colorado landscape through the lens of a landscape architect. I begin by investigating what exactly the terms landscape, natural landscapes, and urban landscapes mean. Based off these definitions, I then go on to explain how urban and natural landscapes compare aesthetically and scientifically. Finally, I analyze the photos I have taken using the knowledge I have learned from my research and the past four years. This honors thesis also intends to be a personal archive that I can share with my future self, my family, and potential employers as a portfolio piece in the future.

Background

My process for choosing this topic was not very difficult. I knew I wanted my honors thesis to be something I could look back on and remember my time at Colorado State University and living in Colorado. I also wanted it to be a piece that I could show my friends and family to fill them in on my experiences while being here. Also, this thesis is another branch of exploration into my major, landscape architecture, and how I interpret the landscape because of my education. As a result, this led me to the decision of the use of photography for my thesis. What better way to capture my time here than through film. Landscape photography captures the here and now of a site. These photographs can be persuasive and capture a certain essence of the site to draw others in (McLean Sailor 2014). This is something I strived to achieve with my photography, capturing something that makes people want more and keeps them looking and wondering.

I chose to use disposable cameras as my medium because I wanted to capture the landscape in its purest form. I did not edit these images to enhance the color or photoshop out a branch that is not aesthetically pleasing because that is not an accurate depiction of what the landscape is

like. I wanted to capture my initial reaction to a site and then once the photos are developed see if I notice anything different after seeing them for a second time. I believe it is important to keep this type of medium alive as digital photography has become the main form of technology now a days. Its simplicity is something I enjoy, and I feel it makes photography more accessible to the public, including myself.

Deciding what to photograph was the hardest part of this project. There are so many breathtaking places in Colorado, but sadly I could not capture them all. Two out of the three sites I had been to previously. I chose them because I wanted physical memories of my favorite places to show others and to keep for myself. These two sites are: City Park in Fort Collins, an urban landscape, and the drive up the Poudre Canyon to Walden, a natural landscape. The third site that was new to me was a natural landscape called the Cathy Fromme Prairie Natural Area in Fort Collins. I chose two natural areas compared to just one urban landscape so I could showcase the variety of natural landscapes in Colorado and because City Park hosts a variety of urban elements that could be captured in one place.

The intent of this thesis is to investigate what exactly natural and urban landscapes are and compare their similarities and differences through images. To investigate these landscapes, we first must define the terms natural landscapes and urban landscapes. Natural landscapes are not as natural as we believe. They are managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS) or the National Parks Service. Natural is a good way to describe it based off of physical appearance. Open plains or Pine forests up in the mountains look untouched. But in reality, they have been touched by man just as much as some urban landscapes. This is something that has been preached to me throughout my journey in the Landscape Architecture program at Colorado State. I finally arrived at a thorough understanding of this concept when I took my first natural resource policy course. Every tree, every open space is heavily accounted for. Through programs like

ArcGIS, a geospatial software used to view, edit, manage and analyze geographic data, it is people's job to constantly monitor natural landscapes conditions.

Knowing this helped me choose my first natural landscape to photograph. Nestled in the Poudre Canyon, Colorado State Highway 14 passes through Arapahoe and Roosevelt National Forests, my favorite natural landscape in Colorado. This road leads to Walden, Colorado, a small town known for its beef, love for Christmas, and is the self-proclaimed moose viewing capital of Colorado. What speaks to me about this area is it feels like a Colorado postcard—the mountains with a beautiful river running through them and eventually opening into rolling plains. Without a doubt, It is what everyone imagines the state to look like, which makes it something intriguing to not only photograph but also to show to others.

Open natural areas are something Fort Collins and Colorado in general really thrive in preserving. Having acres of protected land in an urban setting can sometimes be hard to maintain or keep when development in areas such as Fort Collins or Denver continues to rapidly expand. A study was done analyzing the spatial value for open space using home sales from the Denver metropolitan area. The value for the properties of open space was if the land was protected or not and if public access was allowed. Several measures were used including adjacency, distance to the nearest tract of open space, and percentage of open space area. It was found that homes located near protected land, such as public parks, open spaces and national parks, were the most valuable properties and were seeing the greatest influx of sales compared to properties near private land, vacant land, or agricultural land. (Metz, 127-128). This just shows the importance of open natural areas in urban areas. People want to live near nature and experience it. I argue that it deserves to be preserved and not turned into another subdivision. Natural areas create a sort of harmony or compromise between the natural and urban landscape. Cathy Fromme Prairie Natural Area in Fort Collins embodies this harmony. When gazing straight out from the lookout,

you see nothing but the foothills and can imagine what this area looked like hundreds of years ago when Native Americans roamed the land. If you were to peer left, right, or behind you, you are reminded that you are in a bustling town home to thousands of people. Areas like these can also be overlooked when located by urban areas. I have driven past this area probably hundreds of times but never realized how beautiful and peaceful it actually is. Once I arrived, I knew this was something I needed to photograph and capture my first reaction to the site.

Whether it is a grass lot with a swing set or Central Park in New York City, urban landscapes are something most people have experienced. What is perceived as an urban landscape though varies greatly. Author Reza Keshtkaran does an excellent job diving into the multifaceted meaning behind urban landscapes. The term urban landscape became a specialized term in the late nineteenth century, with the design and actions of Frederick Olmsted, the father of landscape architecture in relation to the development of American cities (Keshtkaran 2019). Since then, the term has only been debated even more. Keshtkaran argues that urban landscapes are broken down into the factors of "aesthetics," "function," "identity," and "ecology." These are the four main goals or purposes of the urban landscape, which are seen in the work of designers and theorists from past decades until now (Keshtkaran 2019). In order for an urban landscape to be successful, these four factors must be present.

Urban landscapes are extremely beneficial to overall human health. According to the World Bank Group, by 2050, the urban population will more than double its current size, at which point nearly 7 of 10 people will live in cities. As our cities continue to grow, air pollution, noise, and a lack of restorative environments are found to be more profound in cities than in rural areas. This can lead to stress symptoms in a significant portion of urban populations. Hedblom et al. bring up these factors and argue that urbanization fragmentation and reduction of urban green spaces are problematic because green spaces reduce stress and increase well-being (Hedblom et

al. 1). The authors conducted a study in which Participants were exposed to one of three multisensory environments (a densely built-up urban area, a park, or a forest) in which physiological stress was initially induced in a stress induction period (Stress period) containing five mild electric shock stimuli. The stress period was followed by a recovery period (Recovery period) to assess potential recovery in the absence of a stressor. Noises and sounds related to the environments were also used to help simulate the scene and create a multisensory experience. The authors found that the respondents had high stress in the urban environment during both the Recovery and the Stress periods, whereas the respondents had significantly lower stress levels in the park during both the Recovery and the Stress periods (Hedblom et al. 2). This is just one of many studies that show that bustling, urban areas are impacting people's health and causing stress. Cities need quiet, green spaces or natural areas in close proximity for people to de-stress and have overall healthier lives.

Another study I found looks at the value of urban green spaces in relation to obesity and mental health issues. Urban landscapes have direct health benefits by providing urban residents spaces for physical activity and social interaction, while also allowing “psychological restoration” to take place (Lee et al. 1). Lee et al. argue that when city planners are designing future urban landscapes, three considerations need to be taken for them to be successful. For the authors, an urban space has value when it successfully promotes healthy living and wellbeing. The first consideration is that urban planning can and should have a public health component in view of the claimed health benefits. Additionally, improving accessibility is likely to lead to greater use of urban landscapes. The second consideration is that residents use urban green spaces in a variety of ways. Because of this, it is important for city planners to understand how the green space may be used and what the needs of residents are. Public engagement in the planning and design process is key in order to enable urban development to better match local

needs and values. Finally, the third consideration is that there is a need for further economic work to calculate the cost of the benefit/utility of urban landscapes. Natural and urban landscapes are becoming increasingly important to humans' overall health as urbanization continues to rapidly grow.

When talking about the importance of these spaces, one thing I want to acknowledge is environmental justice and overall access to these natural and urban landscapes. Author Alessandro Rigolon conducted an environmental justice study of park proximity, acreage, and quality in Denver, Colorado. Rigolon specifically looks at how the youth in this area are being affected. I chose this article because of its location. Denver lacks access and availability to the landscapes I am writing this thesis about. This is something I have learned about through the Urban Design studio I am taking concurrently this semester. Rigolon claims that young people—specifically children and teenagers—are spending less time playing outside in nature than previous generations. This is problematic, as parks can provide young people with physical and mental health benefits. Such as the ones looked at in the previous study. This study investigates the growing health disparities that exist between white and ethnic minority young people in the U.S. Rigolon states that these concerns motivated their investigation into access to parks for young people of different ethnicities and socioeconomic status. This study used a comprehensive geospatial approach—including park proximity, acreage, and quality—that models park and walkability features that support frequent park use for children and teenagers. Rigolon concluded that ethnic minorities and low-income people have better access than other groups in terms of park proximity. High-income and white people, however, have access to significantly more acres of parks per youth, to more parks with excellent levels of quality, and to safer parks than other groups. Due to the dramatic disparities in park safety, it could strongly limit park use among Denver's low-income young people of color. This is something important to note after looking at

the previous two studies. Everyone deserves access to these spaces to better themselves physically and mentally. As I continue my journey as a landscape architect, this is something I will keep in mind as I help to create urban landscapes.

As I keep using the terms natural and urban landscapes, I ask myself what exactly is a landscape? The term landscape is very subjective, and each person will have their own definition. Here are just a few. "Jay Appleton has defined landscape "a kind of backcloth to the whole stage of human activity". Opdam et al. defined landscape as a "geographical unit characterized by a specific pattern of ecosystem types, formed by the interaction of geographical, ecological and human-induced forces." Or Isaak Samuel Zonneveld claims "Landscape refers to a common perceivable part of the Earth's surface" (qtd. in Keshykaran 2019). The examples go on and on, but one thing is clear; the definition of landscape is highly subjective and varies depending on one's area of study and personal experiences.

Author Jeannie Sim approaches the definition of landscape in a unique way. She claims that based off her research and analysis that four key themes commonly appear in different interpretations of the term 'landscape': the importance of human perception (especially sight); the out-of-doors; the mixtures of natural and cultural, fabric and system; and change. This is not a defined answer but more of a check list that is moldable depending on the individual. Maybe these core ideas are more appropriate to understanding what a landscape is instead of one definitive answer. There is no one way to define and enjoy a landscape since each person has their own perception of a place built from all their experiences.

A third interpretation of the landscape I found was by Laura Menatti. Their article analyses how the current idea of landscape, by overcoming its scenery-based characteristics, relates to the notions of the common good, commons and commons pool resources

(CPRs). Menetti begins by claiming the modern concept of landscape has evolved from meaning a pictorial scenery to a social and cultural expression of the human relationship to the environment. Based off this concept, the landscape as a common good is analyzed. The common good is defined as something of general interest belonging to the community and endowed with a political appeal. The Landscape is both a material and immaterial asset belonging to the community. It needs to be protected for future generations, symbolizing the relationship between nature and culture. This shifts the definition of landscape from aesthetics to ethics, with an emphasis on political responsibility. Next, it is determined that landscapes are seen as commons when involving the shared use and collective management of land. The term 'commons' generally refers to the communal and shared use of lands or of goods. This perspective includes urban areas, where community gardens demonstrate collective sensitivity towards landscape developed worldwide. Finally, Landscape can be constituted by common pool resources collectively and locally managed. Landscape includes natural resources managed collectively and locally. This idea comes from the consideration that landscapes are our environment. This challenges the traditional view that landscapes have only been studied as related to aesthetics – in the classical sense of the appreciation of a view or preferences for beautiful scenes – and as a consequence have been separated from the ecological domain. This framework supports the idea of communities managing their environments, advocating for people's active role in decision-making processes about landscapes. Menatti concludes by saying that landscape governance should consider both the rights of humans and the landscape itself, moving beyond just aesthetic appreciation to a complex process in which human beings and the environment are mutually defined.

For natural and urban landscapes to survive, studying their ecology and ecosystems are extremely important. Author Richard T. T. Forman investigates if natural and urban ecologies

are more similar or different. Forman starts by defining urban ecology as “interactions of organisms, built structures, and the physical environment where people are concentrated.” Based off this definition Ninety urban ecology principles were created. These principles are strongly based on the distinctive attributes of built areas, rather being extrapolations or modifications of ecological principles from natural areas. The principles are listed in 11 groups (habitats, biodiversity, soil and organisms, water and organisms, greenspaces, etc.), and are widely familiar and used by ecologists and other disciplines. These groups help in visualizing the similarities and stark contrasts with natural area ecology in the following section. They also help to identify potential linkages tying urban ecology and natural ecosystem ecology closer together. Finally, these ninety principles and 11 groups can all be categorized into four major groups: land uses; built structures; permeating anthropogenic flows; and human decisions/activities.

After doing some more research into the history of urban and natural ecology, Forman concluded that hardly any of the urban ecology attributes are present or significant in natural areas. Thus, interestingly, probably no urban ecology principle would have emerged from research focused on natural areas/ecosystems. Today’s urban ecology principles are largely based on urban characteristics and are qualitatively different from natural-area ecology principles based on natural features. Still, some urban ecology principles may be mainly quantitatively different from, or variants of, natural area principles.

Despite their foundational differences, one study found that properly managed natural and urban landscapes can have very similar ecological attributes. In Eldridge et al., it was discovered that urban greenspaces and nearby natural areas support similar levels of soil multiservices, with only six of 23 attributes (available phosphorus, water holding capacity, water respiration, plant cover, arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF), and arachnid richness) significantly greater in greenspaces, and one (available ammonium) greater in natural areas

(Eldridge et al., 1). I found this study interesting after learning about the principles of urban ecology in the previous paragraph. Urban and natural ecology are foundationally and qualitatively different but can still hold scientifically similar results.

Findings

Finally, onto the good stuff. After receiving my photos, I decided to analyze them using two different approaches. For my first approach, I want to look at specifically City Park and see if I can define it as an urban landscape based off the research I found. As I previously mentioned, there are four main goals/ purposes of urban landscapes: aesthetics, function, identity, and ecology. I tried to identify each one of these goals/ purposes in my photos. The first purpose I looked at was aesthetics. Aesthetics, more than anything, relates to sensory experience, in the general sense; for example, it can be an experience of beautiful artistic or natural beauty. I found that beauty is essential to the quality of the landscape. Beauty is also subjective to the viewer. It is based off personal experiences and one's background just like the definition of landscape. Pictures 1 and 2 I felt showcased aesthetics best. Picture 1 is of a beautiful stone wall that really brings character to the landscape that is really unique to City Park. Picture 2 is the view from the dock of the pond. Growing up by the Great Lakes, I really appreciate the water and their beauty. This pond reminds me of the beauty of the Great Lakes just on a much smaller scale. Also seeing the fall leaves in the background makes the image even better. It is my favorite view at City Park. So based off my interpretation of beauty, I said that yes City Park is aesthetic.

The next purpose/ goal is function. The function of a site relates to the quality and quantity of activities a site has. Keshtkaran (2019) claims that “When all types of activities take place together and complete each other, the collective spaces of cities become meaningful and attractive.” City Park hosts a variety of activities: there's a playground, water park and pool area, the pond, a pottery studio, a dog park, and large expanses of open space for sport teams to

practice or for individuals to just wander and be in nature. Picture 3 is of the pond at City Park, one of the landscape's largest activities. While I was there, I saw people fishing and also just sitting on benches and relaxing and enjoying the view. There is also a trail that goes around the pond that I saw many people using. The day I went the weather was not the best and definitely found it interesting to see the amount of people there. Based off everything I just listed, I decided that yes City Park definitely has enough variety of activities, and its function is successful.

The third purpose/ goal is identity. The three components of identity are "meaning (icon or symbol), culture (attention to the customs, beliefs, and traditions of one society), and history (what understandable historical mentions are there in the urban landscape)" (Keshtkaran 2019). Picture 4 is of City Park's main sign and to me it encapsulates the site's identity perfectly. The name City Park itself is a main indicator of the identity of the landscape. It is claiming to be the main park of Fort Collins. It aims to be a park for all the people that live there. Also having Horsetooth on the sign is very important. Horsetooth is a major symbol for Fort Collins and the history of the city and the people who live there. It is also one of the most noticeable landmarks of the area. City Park is very successful in communicating its identity and achieves the third purpose/ goal.

The final goal/ purpose is ecology. This is seen as successful if a strong relationship between urban aspects and ecosystems are present in the landscape. I found that while taking my pictures that City Park is a complex landscape. There is a pond, green spaces, and old trees all present at this site. I notice that the landscape all seemed to be very well maintained and cared for, which is important to the success of an urban landscape. When taking pictures by the pond I saw something else that made me feel like the ecology of the landscape was successful, Ducks! Seeing animals in the ecosystem seems to me that it is healthy and is able to support life besides itself. Picture 6 captures the ducks. Both pictures 5 and 6 are images that show the strong

relationship between a thriving landscape and urban aspects. After my visit, I felt that the ecology of the site is cared for and successful. After successfully analyzing my photos with these four goals/purposes, I concluded that yes, City Park can be defined as a successful urban landscape.

The second way I chose to analyze all my photos was with the elements of design. I specifically looked at line, color, and texture. The first element I looked at was line. Line created the most interesting composition I felt. It draws the eye to a certain place and attracts the viewers' attention. Pictures 7,8, and 9 are the images that I felt represented line best. Line very different images and feature line in a unique way. The next element I looked at is color. Color is very important to me and was the driving factor as to why I chose to analyze my pictures with elements of design. I also specifically chose to do my honors thesis in the fall so I could capture the fall colors of Colorado. I feel that the photos from Walden showcase color best compared to the other two sites. The contrast of the blue sky and yellow, orange, and red leaves is really stunning and captures the Colorado landscape I want to remember and also show my loved ones. Pictures 10, 11, 12, and 13 are the images I felt showcased these colors the best.

What attracts me to color the most is the maze a variety of colors make. It keeps your eyes moving and forces you to really take in the image in front of you. Color also creates these high contrast moments that are really beautiful. The final element I looked at was texture. Texture helps create an interesting composition and gives an image dimension. Pictures 14, 15, and 16 are the images I used to represent texture. One thing I noticed is that the different tree types create a variety of textures that are very appealing. The use of different materials also creates a contrast in textures that is appealing as well. Also, texture can really help with creating an Identity for a landscape. Is it rugged or smooth? Heavily vegetated or barren? Warm toned or cool?

Finally, I have some random findings that I noticed while taking the pictures that I would like to expand on. I noticed the way people interacted with the different landscapes. In natural landscapes, people moved with the landscape trying to disturb as little as possible. I felt that people attempted to protect natural landscapes more than urban landscapes. People feel more respectful. In urban landscapes, people moved through the landscape. I noticed people running around more freely and having no clear path. Different ways of exploring landscape.

Conclusion

As I organize my final thoughts, I want to reflect on why this thesis is important for people other than myself to explore. My honors thesis intends to educate individuals on the Colorado landscape through the lens of a landscape architect. I want people to understand the importance of natural and urban landscapes and where humans fall into place. How humans interact with the landscape is detrimental to its survival, so we need to treat the landscapes with respect if we want them to still exist for future generations.

This project is important to people outside of my area of interest because few people know the depths of landscape architecture or what it even is. It is more than planting bushes in someone's front yard. Landscape architecture involves designing, planning, and managing outdoor spaces, including natural environments. It integrates the natural and built environment in a way that creates functional, aesthetically pleasing, and sustainable landscapes for everyone to enjoy.

This honors thesis has been a labor of love that I have enjoyed so much. I am proud of myself for finishing this thesis and all the work I put into it. It has allowed me to explore my interests at a level I never have before. As a first-generation student, I never knew what to expect out of college or what my experience would be like. The honors program has helped guide me through

the past four years and given me goals to work towards. Completing this thesis was something I am not only doing for myself but also for my friends and family who have supported me through the past four years.

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**A VISUAL EXPLORATION INTO THE NATURAL
AND URBAN LANDSCAPES OF COLORADO:
PICTURE COLLECTION**

Jenna Gibbons
Fall 2024

PURPOSE

This is a space for me to reflect on my thought process of taking these pictures and my thoughts after receiving them.

PICTURE 1



When I saw this stone wall I immediately knew I had to take a picture of it. I love the chacarter it brings to City Park and felt it helped shape its identity.

PICTURE 2



I sat by the pond at City Park for a while taking in the space and eating a snack. It is a focal point for the park and is a key piece to its identity. I also really enjoyed the contrast of the water and the fall leaves. I was trying to also capture the trail surrounding it and the people using it.

PICTURE 3



This is another picture of my trying to capture the colors of the fall leaves. I just love this sightline and wanted to make sure I captures one of my favorite views.

PICTURE 4



I took this picture because I love the character and identity the City Park sign has. The stone similar to the stone wall and the carving of Horsetooth really captured my eye. It is a fun sign that tells a story.

PICTURE 5



I saw these three pine trees and was immediately drawn to them. The use of odd numbers and them standing out against the deciduous trees is what caught my eye. This is one of my favorite pictures from city park that is not the pond.

PICTURE 6



I had to take a picture of the ducks! It was so fun to see them and there was several little kids who enjoyed them as well. I enjoyed seeing the park come to life because of them.

PICTURE 7



This is definitely one of my favorite pictures I took overall. I was drawn to the pattern that the lawn mower left after mulching the leaves. This was left unintentionally but I feel like it brings so much to the space aesthetically. I also really enjoyed the contrast of the warm and cool colors after receiving the photo.

PICTURE 8



I took this picture at the natural area. I loved the line the fence drew and really enjoy pictures of old fences in landscapes. The lighting in these photos ended up turning out really dark but I feel like it adds a sense of curiosity to the photo. What is out there in the dark? The fence is guiding you in the image.

PICTURE 9



I saw the contrast of the plant type and color and knew I had to take a photo. I love the bright yellow on one side and then the dark green on the other.

PICTURE 10



I took this photo because of the beautiful yellow leaves. You can't only see color like this for a short period of the year and it was something I wanted to capture. This cluster of yellow Aspens was perfect for that. The dark blue sky contrasting it makes for a really beautiful picture.

PICTURE 11



I took this picture because of the fiery orange peaking out. This orange is such a nice color and is not as common as the typical yellow I feel. I really like the dark green and then the warm colors peaking out.

PICTURE 12



I took this picture to show the different tree types in the fall season. All the leaves on the ground was something that caught my eye too. It is interesting to see tall the yellow and then the green in the back.

PICTURE 13



The main reason I took this picture was because of the cows. I love seeing them on the drive up to Walden. This time some cows had even got loose and were on the side of the road! I also wanted to capture the plains slowly turning into the mountains. The muted color of the grass is really nice with the blue sky.

PICTURE 14



i took this picture because I really enjoyed the texture all the different plant types made. The yellows, greens, and tans create this really interesting composition to look at.

PICTURE 15



I also took this picture because of its texture and depth. The different plant types and colors make this photo complex in such a simple spot. Your eye is constantly moving trying to take everything in. I thought this area was busy in a good way.

PICTURE 16



When I saw the paw prints in the concrete I immediately knew I needed a picture of them. They unintentionally bring character to the site. It makes you picture some animal walking around and the nature surrounding them. Many people would overlook this but those who notice are told a story about City Park even more.

PICTURE 17



I took this picture because of the contrast of the content of the image. These beautiful white wild flowers are the main focus and then you see the metal fence and the stone is the background. This contrast of delicate versus rugged really caught my eye and I felt like it would make for an interesting image.

THANK YOU!

