

## Waste Not, Want Not

*Drosscape: Wasting Land in Urban America* by Alan Berger. Princeton Architectural Press, 2006. 254 pp., \$34.95

Reviewed by Robert Fishman

This profoundly original book at once advances and subverts the great challenge of “thinking regionally.” For most of us, this challenge means, first, an analysis of a region’s assets, the distinctive metropolitan-scaled landscape that gives each region its special identity. We dwell fondly on a region’s historic core, its close-knit neighborhoods and parks, its waterways and shorelines and high places, and the unspoiled hinterlands at its edge. Berger exactly inverts this procedure. His focus is on what he calls “the drosscape,” that vast, fragmented metropolitan landscape of neglect and contamination that contains the wastelands the conventional regional vision refuses to see.

Berger’s term “drosscape” derives from the distinction between urban “stim”—the areas within a metropolitan region of intense, concentrated activity—and “dross”—the vast in-between or peripheral areas where distance and disconnection prevail—created by Lars Lerup, dean of the Rice University School of Architecture. Berger expands Lerup’s distinction into a whole taxonomy of the marginal and the abandoned. With the same precise attention that earlier landscape architects lavished on natural topography, Berger carefully classifies drosscape sites into such categories as landscapes of transition (LOTS), i.e. temporary storage centers; landscapes of infrastructure (LINS), underused rail or highway rights-of-way; landscapes of obsolescence (LOOs), such as landfills and water-treatment facilities and abandoned factories; landscapes of exchange (LEXs), obsolete malls and other retail facilities; and landscapes of contamination (LOCs), the “brownfields” that are the signature feature of most regional drosscapes.

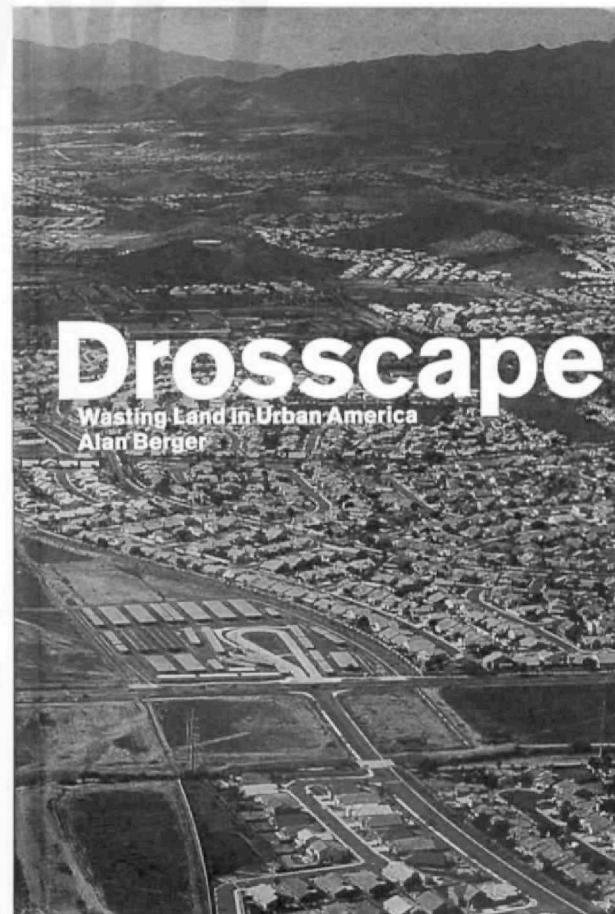
Berger’s great achievement in this book is to weave together all these elements of dross into an overarching drosscape whose collective scale and structure within our metropolitan regions has never before been so convincingly documented. Berger has collected the best quantitative data now available from ten major metropolitan regions: Atlanta, Boston, Charlotte/Raleigh/Durham, Chicago,

Cleveland, Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Houston. And he has synthesized and mapped that data onto drosscape maps and charts for each region, providing some of the best overall regional mappings we now possess.

Perhaps most remarkably, Berger has visualized the drosscape through an extended campaign of aerial photography. He chartered small planes to fly over each of the regions he studied to photograph key drosscape vistas. As Lerup himself observes in a useful afterword, these photographs are almost too beautiful for Berger’s purposes. Nevertheless, they demonstrate with a visceral force the sheer scale of the drosscape. Here is the regional vision that regionalists have striven mightily not to see.

One might question Berger’s motives in so carefully documenting these distressed areas. Yet there is a logic—potentially a true regional logic—in Berger’s subversions. Strangely enough, it comes directly out of the heritage of landscape architecture. Despite its association in the popular mind with designing pretty parks and gardens, landscape architecture has in its most ambitious forms always been concerned with combating the polluted state of the urban environment. The very ideal of *rus in urbe*—the countryside in the city—derived from the recognition that the pollution generated by the city’s crush of humanity can only be mitigated by the careful insertion of natural systems into the urban environment. In late 19th-century America, there was no worse drosscape than the polluted Boston mudflat occupying what we now know as the Back Bay Fens. It took the genius of Frederick Law Olmsted to see that, by artificially planting a salt marsh on the site, the stinking Muddy River Valley could be transformed into a beautiful “natural” park that also provided for sewerage and flood protection. Similarly, the Burnham and Bennett *Plan of Chicago* (1909) surrounded the built-up area of the city with a set of parks and “forest preserves.” More important, the Chicago plan began the transformation of the drosscape of railroad yards and polluting industries that then lined almost the entire Chicago lakeshore into the great linear parks that today are the glory of that city.

Lurking within Berger’s book is a similar aspiration to turn dross into green. But as Berger recognizes in his con-



cluding *Drosscape Manifesto*, the drosscape is in part necessary: every region creates waste as a product of its growth. The task is to minimize and manage the drosscape, especially the vast wastelands that have emerged as a result of the deindustrialization of many American cities. For such sites, Berger calls for an entrepreneurial, proactive approach. Since inner-city drosscapes, as he rightly observes, “have few stakeholders, caretakers, guardians, or spokespersons,” designers must take the initiative in identifying and researching sites. Working from this analysis, their main task is then to find or even to create the clients who might implement a solution.

Difficult as that can be when dealing with inner-city brownfields, this method can be even more problematic for exurban sites, which have perhaps too many stakeholders rather than too few. Homebuilders and developers of offices, industrial parks, and malls all profit from their ability to waste space in huge subdivisions or big-box stores surrounded by parking lots. In the exurban context Berger denies himself the consolation available to an Olmsted or Burnham: that there exists an unspoiled natural realm just outside the limits of the metropolis. In his earlier *Reclaiming the American West* (2002), Berger powerfully subverted the idea of an unspoiled American wilderness by focusing on the massive wastelands generated by mining and the scale of the necessary remediation of abandoned mines. As he shows in *Drosscape*, the exurban drosscape is not simply the result of urban industries and land uses

polluting the rural hinterlands; it is also the result of the city encountering at its periphery already-polluted and spoiled landscapes of rural exploitation.

The unresolved issue of Berger’s *Drosscape Manifesto*—and, for me, the book as a whole—is the relationship of the drosscape analysis to more conventional regional visions, especially as embodied in “smart growth” or New Urbanism. Is the drosscape vision the negation of smart growth, or a necessary part of an effective smart growth strategy? Berger claims to stand above the sprawl debate, a claim that is supported by the sophistication of his analysis of the complex landscape elements that activists dismiss with the shibboleth of “sprawl.” But what regional design strategy follows from his analysis?

What emerges most clearly for me from this book is the danger of “grand regional strategy”: the attempt to revive too quickly and too easily the vanished clarity of Olmsted’s “Emerald Necklace” of parks around Boston or Burnham’s forest preserves around Chicago with such measures as regional growth boundaries or other solutions that look good on big maps. The drosscape must be evaluated, remediated, and ultimately re-integrated into the metropolitan landscape parcel by parcel.

And this means, in Berger’s analysis, that the designer must eschew the heroic role of master planner for the more modest role of collaborator and negotiator. Turning dross into green thus requires a transformation in the design professions as well as in the brownfields. ■