Outside Lies Magic

Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places

John R. Stilgoe

WALKER AND COMPANY
NEW YORK

Four

Strips

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ROADS WITHER? When grass grows not among the railroad ties but in the streets?

The explorer soon knows what the harried motorist misses until the motorist blows a tire or bends a rim in a pothole. Roads everywhere in the country crumble now, and the edges of pavement grow more ragged by the year. Even urban streets reveal a sort of fraying where pavement meets curbstone, where the subtle subsidence of storm-drain and manhole covers makes craters, where the long, thin, branching cracks that run parallel to the roadway and bunch together near the center line of pavement turn into crevices. Forced to the edge of pavement by automobiles and trucks, the explorer sees the margin of pavement in ways motorists never do. The explorer notes the

storm drains choked with leaves and dirt, the pavement buckled by frost and snowplows, the myriad hot-top patches applied after slapdash water- and gas-main repair, the so-called cold-patch asphalt scaling from potholes scabbed over on winter days. And in the late spring, the explorer descries the seeds sprouting in the soil between pavement and curbstone, or the grass thrusting up through cracks inches away from thrumming automobile tires. Across much of rural, even small-town and suburban America, the explorer sees the slow drift of pine needles, crumbled leaves, and vine tendrils moving from shoulders long unmowed onto and across the asphalt. In city and country, the explorer knows the roadway ecosystem and knows that nature slowly retakes the road as it retook the railroad station platform decades ago.

Always highways create an artificial ecosystem of living things, one that in time overwhelms fragile blacktop. Pavement drains rainwater into storm drains sometimes, but usually onto shoulders, and the rainwater creates ecosystems dependent on it. Across semiarid regions, especially the High Plains, the explorer moves on the edge of the black, paralleling a two-foot-wide band of dark green, often rather lush vegetation. But six feet from the edge of asphalt, the deep green fades into paleness, then brown, for the scant rainfall collected along the edge of the

pavement seeps only a few feet into the ordinary dry-soil ecosystem. In humid places, plentiful rainfall not only washes frequently over always-lush shoulders but fills and refills the ditches that line so many secondary and tertiary roads. In the ditches grow wetland plants alien to the upland a few feet away, and in the stagnant or slightly flowing water live the reptiles and amphibians long accustomed to the motor vehicles roaring past, just inches away, but not always careful to avoid being hit. Along ditch-lined roads, especially in spring, explorers walk as body counters, marveling at the carcasses of snakes and toads and salamanders.

Often the plants bordering the asphalt are exotic, strangers from other places down the road, sometimes from far away. Farm trucks roaring to market spill sorghum seed, and the sorghum sprouts along suburban roads; lawn-service trucks carrying away bamboo or other invasive plants like the imported five-foot-tall grass *Fragmenties* lose a bit of cargo from beneath flapping canvas, and here and there the foreign plants take route a few feet from the pavement, often quickly edging out indigenous species.

Occasionally highway departments mow the shoulder or berm, but as capital-improvement and maintenance budgets shrank after the 1960s, the mowing machines came less and less frequently,

shrubs replaced grasses, and roots probed beneath pavement, then rose to buckle it. The explorer notices the withdrawal of shoulder maintenance because the explorer cannot ignore how quickly the roadside ecosystem invades the road, especially when maintenance and traffic both decrease, and how permanently the roadside ecosystem establishes itself. And the explorer knows that the roadside ecosystem of plants and animals prospers as another ecosystem withers.

HIGHWAYS AND WELL-TRAVELED roads produce an economic ecosystem, too, and always have. Bicyclists in the most rural regions of the original thirteen colonies still pedal past the once-lonely inns where travelers rested while coachmen changed horses; walkers in urban areas stride past hotels that replaced the hotels that replaced the hotels in which coach travelers delighted. Old inns remind the explorer that horses tired as well and sometimes needed replacement far from cities and villages and county seats. Most lonely inns became less lonely gasoline stations in the first years of the twentieth century, if their owners did not convert them to general stores or houses in the long decades when railroad travel emptied almost every long-distance road in the nation.

Explorers sometimes realize, after walking uphill for miles and beginning to think about a snack or lunch, that innkeepers often located inns where teamsters stopped to rest tired horses. Inns, rural general stores, old wood-frame gasoline stations still stand in places useful to tired walkers and tired horses. Explorers thinking about muscles today begin to discover ways muscle power shaped landscape in centuries past.

Consider the pail bail, nowadays called the handle of the bucket. Carry the pail and the bail arcs above the rim. Set down the pail and the bail falls sideways along the rim. Either way, the bail remains the same length. Such is the lesson of nineteenth-century farmers explaining road routing to impatient children sitting beside them in wagons creeping around a hill or mountain. Upright or flat along the rim, the bail remains the same length. But far better to let the horse follow a flat, curving route than one of the same length over a steep hill. Why tire the horse?

So the exploring walker or bicyclist understands the relationship of hills and muscles, and knows that even now businesses cluster at the base or top of hills, rarely midway along the grades. Where horses rested the explorer often rests, and sometimes finds a gasoline station or store occupying the site of some eighteenth- or nineteenth-century hostelry. But more

likely the back-road explorer finds only a grown-over cellar hole or a massive elm shading lesser trees. Business moved to other places once Ford put the nation into flivvers.

By 1920, businessmen knew that travelers moved so frequently by automobile that only the most prosperous of downtowns would survive. Motorists wanted to park, to drive quickly between home and town, farm and village, city to city, to not get lost or mired in mud. As early as 1900, the first motorists learned to use League of American Wheelmen bicycling maps to plan their motorized routes, and learned to visit the country inns and taverns at which tens of thousands of bicyclists refreshed themselves in the stunningly popular first fifteen years of the bicycle fad, when the LAW became a major political action group agitating solely for road improvement. Year by year, local and state governments improved road signs, road-surface conditions, and bridges, then funded innovations like numbered routes and traffic signals adapted from railroads. As roads improved and cars became more reliable, motorists drove more and more miles with less and less deliberation, and merchants grasped what gasoline station owners knew. A roadside location with off-road parking meant greater and greater business.

The explorer on a bike sees the palimpsest of eco-

nomic development simply because he or she moves from era to era effortlessly, sometimes cruising alongside the cars parallel parked in front of nineteenth-century storefronts, sometimes warily skirting cars angle parked in turn-of-the-century small-town main streets, then pedaling into more modern places. Just at the edge of most small towns, clinging still to the fringes of suburban train-station-focused villages, stretching outward from great cities stand the highway-focused business districts built between 1920 and 1950 when the roads they still front were the main roads to everywhere. The explorer knows the commercial ecosystem of those decades by the way its buildings snuggle against the road, sometimes because owners built far too close to the road to begin with, but usually because highway departments subsequently widened roads as traffic thickened and trucks grew wider.

On old highways, gas stations and restaurants and furniture stores now sit so close to pavement that they remind the bicyclist that once traffic moved about twenty-five miles an hour, that motorists spotting a gasoline logo or ice cream stand had plenty of time to slow down and pull in, turning sharply into the shallow parking lots. Often the explorer sees the telltales of the era, the gasoline station with pumps set only ten feet in from the pavement, protected by

no curbstone, and set only ten feet out from the station building itself, or the fast-food building shaped like a bottle or ice cream cone or coffeepot equally close to the road, often with a parking lot forcing customers to back perilously close to traffic when leaving.

ON SUCH ROADS the explorer probes casually and easily, for most motor vehicle traffic usually moves elsewhere, on wider roads a mile or so away, the roads lined with post–World War II shopping plazas, not malls. Plazas march along the wider roads usually numbered as state highways or business state highways, and plazas scream the importance of the 1960s car-driving woman shopper. Each plaza is anchored by a large store, often still a supermarket, its parking lot bordered on two other sides by lines of smaller stores selling everything from liquor to greeting cards to dry cleaning to sheets and pillowcases, its tenants advertised on a single overloaded sign planted at the edge of the road. The arrangement speaks of the spread of wide-open-space, West Coast–style retailing across the nation in the 1950s and 1960s.

Still busy, now often widened into five lanes, the plaza-lined highway, the commercial strip that in time inspired the creators of Las Vegas to build miles

of casinos, owns a different time from old downtown shopping districts. It sleeps late on all but Saturday morning, awakening about ten and becoming busy only around noon, when lunch-hour-freed shoppers drive madly along it doing short-time errands, and nowadays buying lunch at any one of scores of specialized fast-foot outlets. Early afternoon brings out the retired couples and the stay-at-home mothers, and late afternoon attracts the high school kids not only working after school but shopping and hanging out and cruising around, enjoying the real world after indoor lessons. And evening brings the mad rush of home-bound shoppers doing more errands and, lately, buying meals ordered from car telephones, and the hesitant arrival of tourists and travelers struggling to find low-cost motels and lower-cost meals. As the remains of urban downtown retail districts lock up for the night, the commercial strip lights up, its millions of lights advertising that maternity shops and video stores and pizza parlors and fabric shops stay open until half past nine or later.

Despite their frenzy, commercial strips lose vitality now, something the walker or bicyclist discovers while exploring the back parking lots linked to each other in ways few motorists but all police officers know. Behind the glitter lurks the same deterioration so pronounced along the older retail ribbons, the de-

terioration resulting from the spawning of great regional malls in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and now from the coming of "category-buster" megastores demanding mall-size parking lots dedicated to their customers alone. Bicycle-riding explorers notice because they must. Every so often they need a new tube or tire or chain, and they know where they must pedal to find a bicycle shop.

Low-profit-margin businesses like bicycle shops cannot afford shopping mall locations and often can scarcely afford the rents in shopping plazas either. Moreover, bicycle shops need lots of floor space to display bicycles, just as furniture stores and mattress stores need lots of floor space too. So the bicycle-riding explorer needing a spare tube or updated component rides off away from the malls and the upscale plazas to the older strips where the muffler shops and radiator-repair businesses nestle against paint outlets and used sporting equipment emporiums. The bicyclist-explorer finds not only businesses slowly dying but businesses starting up, and sees the oddness of businesses strung out along highways but no longer dependent on business from motorists passing by. Instead the older commercial strips serve mostly customers making a special visit, and gradually signage becomes less and less important, less well designed, less well maintained, sometimes rusted and vine cov-

ered and topsy-turvy. No wonder the tourist or the motorist taking a different route cannot readily interpret the jam of signs and so often turns away from the older highways. Secondary shopping strips belong to those familiar with them, and business owners along them know that tourists stay on the interstate and rarely stray far from exit ramps when seeking motels or restaurants.

BEHIND ALMOST ALL commercial strips the explorer moves along the secret rights-of-way that few motorists find, that cheat all motorists, even the motorized police officer smelling trouble. A narrow ribbon snakes from one parking lot to another, through the trees on undeveloped sites, across the junk heaped up from aborted construction and demolition projects, always connecting one loading-dock area to another. Pedestrians use the ribbon. Sometimes homeless people scavenge in Dumpsters behind fast-food stores and sleep in warm cartons behind the appliance outlet and beg two-day-old bread from the back doorways of bakeries. Far more often teenagers use the corridor, hurrying back and forth between part-time jobs. They like to ride their mountain bikes along the corridor to avoid the crush of motor vehicle traffic on the highway a few hundred yards parallel,

especially the danger and nuisance of cars forever turning from highway into parking lot and vice versa. Motorists no more notice the absence of pedestrians and bicyclists on commercial-strip highways than shopping mall customers are aware of the sorts of stores rarely found in malls. But the explorer glimpsing a half-dozen young riders vanishing behind a supermarket, then emerging from a parking lot barrier, walks or pedals away from the traffic jam toward the back of the strip, past the trailer truck waiting to unload, past the Dumpsters, onto the cognoscenti ribbon that twists and turns, sometimes becoming a two-rut cart path, now and then merging into a long-abandoned railroad right-of-way, then racing along a power-line right-of-way, then dropping into a litter-strewn, half-flooded parking lot studded with burned-out cars.

Everywhere the secret corridor intersects lesser routes at right angles, paths that vanish into scrub trees, paths that penetrate chain-link fences cut asunder ages ago. The narrow paths link residential neighborhoods with the secret corridor that snakes behind the backs of the commercial buildings, and frequently provide young children with shortcuts between grade schools and ball fields. Often the paths run at right angles through the wooded buffer strips some planning agencies mandate as screens between

residential and commercial zones, giving any explorer a sense of moving through a narrow ribbon of wilderness. Sometimes the right-angle paths cross the oddest bodies of water imaginable—miles-long sloughs produced to drain the acres of parking lots abutting the highway, or to drain the highway storm drains themselves—or other bodies that to the explorer probing with an old stick seem to be deep-water remnants of nineteenth-century canals abandoned since the railroad victory of the 1870s. Bridges here and there dignify the right-angle paths, often bridges made of planks piled one atop another by several generations of children wanting to pass dry shod toward candy or baseball cards or CDs. And often No Trespassing signs and sometimes crude fences mark the far termini of the paths, the muddy or dusty places where paths fray into juniper hedges, board fences, swimming-pool enclosures, garages, vegetable gardens, all the constituent elements of a residential neighborhood.

The secret corridor proves an amazingly fast shortcut to any explorer determined to brush aside low-hanging branches and to risk broken glass and rusted wire. And it offers the probing and poking explorer another view of the chrome-and-glitter commercial strip, even of the regional mall, for it makes clear the stealth with which change comes. Build a

new highway and the old strip withers, its buildings no longer leased to prime tenants, its landlords unable to resurface parking lots, spruce up facades. Build no new highways and the old strip withers too, as would-be shoppers drive elsewhere to avoid the traffic jams. Do nothing to accommodate larger trailer trucks making deliveries, and the truckers will pull over onto the unpaved ground, disturb then kill the plants, then set in motion erosion after every thunderstorm. Let the snowplow operators ram snow farther and farther beyond the pavement, and every spring reveals a plant-free gap on which teenagers can race ATVs and ancient motorcycles. Leave the graffiti on the back of the carpet store more than a day or two, and more graffiti appears, then more, until repainting the back of the store seems the only sensible thing to do until the landlord realizes that almost no one sees the mess, only the occasional employee stealing a cigarette by the back door, and the kids biking past, and the rare adult pedestrian pondering the wholesale abandonment of backdoor retail space.

Front-door retail space stands abandoned, too, sometimes merely month-to-month as For Rent signs fade into pallor, sometimes boarded up against vandals and arsonists, sometimes well insured and baiting vandals and arsonists. A building or two left

derelict might be a mere eyesore, but the explorer realizes it stands as the first pronounced warning that economic trouble stalks the road, that the road has already failed a business or a handful of businesses, that more stand endangered.

The explorer who breaches the concrete barriers defending the abandoned parking lot often finds the clues explaining bankruptcy. Behind the building poke up the pipes of pollution-finding companies, and here and there rises the soil turned over by space-suited technicians pondering PCBs dumped long ago. In most states, commercial lenders demand site inspections before loaning money to would-be buyers, and explorers see the fruits of environmental sensitivity. Ecological responsibility sprouts up in test pipes and disturbed soil, but financial nightmare for property owners shows up best in pipes overgrown with wild morning-glory vines and test pits smothered in ragweed.

Once found, hazardous waste often requires wealth beyond imagination to clean up, and hazardous waste lies everywhere along the commercial strips, especially along the strips dating to the 1920s, when gas station mechanics poured oil into the ground and siding contractors dumped the asbestos shingles they could not burn. Exploring bicyclists riding the secret network behind commercial strips

sometimes see the telltale signs, the drainage ditch floating in oil after a rain, the plants tinged bright yellow after droughts, the trees dead and dying after septic-tank work, the proliferation of *Fragmenties*, the alien import that flourishes in ground polluted with cadmium, lead, and other toxic metals.

So rapidly did heavy industry fail in the late 1960s and early 1970s that many contemporary shoppers forget the plating factory or small chemical works or dye plant that once stood where the shopping plazas pulse, or the junkyard on which developers built a regional mall. But the bicyclist wheeling along behind the plazas or the walker probing the sandy hillside beyond the mall parking lot glimpses the old Reo oil truck half buried in the eroded hillside and wonders what used to pay property taxes on the site. Oil and gasoline? Paints and solvents? Bleaching and tanning chemicals? Why a half mile beyond the mall does the old truck-repair dealership stand vacant year after year, or enormous trees with yellow-tinted leaves grow up in the abandoned fertilizer warehouse? Why does the dog loping along the path toward home shy away from the water seeping from the gravel bank behind the bank? Or as the explorer asks, sniffing the air suddenly, What is that sickly sweet smell? Most pedestrians or bicyclists exploring ordinary metropolitan landscape acquire fragmentary

answers, learn a little bit of botany even if they never know the history or name of newly arrived plants that thrive in poison.

So Sunday morning finds the explorer sipping the last of the doughnut-shop coffee, wiping the honey-glazed doughnut stickiness on the grass, thinking at length about how much anyone can learn about American land development by meandering along and through a commercial strip. Investment money flows along the strips sometimes as obvious as a running brook, sometimes as concealed as complicated storm drains. And the explorer walking and looking and thinking realizes that the commercial strip is a sort of business ecosystem with its own dinosaurs, its own predators, its own survivors.

It is a remarkably accessible ecosystem, that much the explorer knows for certain. The customer is always welcome, always embraced by signs and parking lots and automatic doors. When the explorer stops for a minute or so to watch the commercial ecosystem, the explorer notices that the commercial strip is the portal through which toddlers and slightly older children enter the public realm. Long before a child learns about a schoolroom, the child learns how to behave in a fast-food restaurant and how to walk through a store, staying close to his or her own adults and not touching the merchandise. Accompanied by

an adult with money to spend, every child is welcome in the ribbon of gleaming stores. The commercial strip and the shopping mall sweep a child into the world of the shopper, the easily accessible high road to acquisition, the road of private enterprise. So overwhelming is the welcome that highways without abutting retail businesses strike many children and many adults as dull.