

Play on the Middle Landscape: The Ball Park and the Resort Hotel, 1860-1984

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Two decades ago, Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) pointed to the importance of the “pastoral ideal” in understanding the American experience. Concerned with how Americans adjusted to the shift from a rural to an urban-industrial society, Marx asserted that pastoralism became increasingly identified with the notion of the “middle landscape: unimproved raw nature, the garden, and the city. The middle landscape was the garden, a domesticated wilderness which eventually made room for the machine. It represented a compromise between nature and the city, between primitivism and an untempered urbanism.

One of the ways Americans have displayed a commitment to the ideal of the middle landscape is in leisure. Two structures have proven especially adapted to providing a middle ground between nature and the city: the ball park and the resort hotel. In an important sense, these two components of the built environment of leisure complement one another. As a setting for a game played in the sunshine on a field of green grass, the ball park brought nature into the city. By contrast, the resort hotel transported urban amenities into the country side. In both cases, the result was the same: it was play on the middle landscape.

The developing historiography of the resort hotel closely parallels that of the ball park regarding the pastoral ideal. In both cases, the interpretation describes a decline from that ideal: it is a story of declension. The evolution of both structures was marked by a shift from a model which stressed interaction with nature toward forms which were inner-directed. By the 1950s and 1960s both the ball park and the hotel tended toward forms which made the identification of any version of the middle landscape increasingly difficult.

The development of the ball park and the hotel exemplify how Americans' response to the notion of the middle landscape has shifted over the last century. They indicate not only that different versions of the middle landscape existed over time, but also that different versions could exist simultaneously during periods of transition. In the case of the resort hotel, we may be currently in one of those transition periods. A shift is occurring toward a model of hotel design in which emphasis is placed on a structure's interaction with its natural setting. Whether this new emphasis will also be reflected in ball park design remains problematical.