Stone Walls and Shopping Malls: Retail Landscapes in the Bluegrass

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I am fourth year architecture major at the University of Kentucky. The research for this paper was initially conducted with the help of an Undergraduate Research and Creativity Grant in the Summer of 2004. Last year I resumed the work as the subject of my senior thesis for the Gaines Center for the Humanities, of which this paper is a chapter. A separate paper on general use of stone walls in the contemporary Bluegrass landscape was presented in the Fall and Spring of 2004 and 2005 for the Honors Roundtable and College of Design Student Lecture Series, respectively. In addition, it was presented as a poster in the Posters at the Capitol event in Frankfort in the Spring of 2005. This work has allowed me to have a sustained relationship with Dr. Raitz and other faculty in the Geography department, College of Design, and Landscape Architecture program, which has been very enriching and rewarding. I hope to take the knowledge of the cultural landscape gathered from this research and apply it to my future study and practice of architecture.

**Abstract**

This paper is an analysis of the recent use of veneered stone walls in the contemporary retail landscapes of the Bluegrass. These walls have been used in conjunction with other elements of the region’s landscape symbol vocabulary to re-create the equine landscape of Central Kentucky in commercial spaces. They seek to evoke the region’s symbolic landscape of wealthy horse estates, utilizing their inaccessibility to elicit an associative attitude of aspiration in the shopper. But they also speak to the values of the businesses and citizens who produce them. The earliest of these walls were found in the street frontage and signage of shopping centers. Most recently, stone veneer has been incorporated in contexts other than landscape walls in order to indicate a center’s amenity relative to other shopping centers.

**Post Facto Walls**

A casual observer of the Kentucky Bluegrass would likely remark on the qualities of its rural landscape. The image of the Bluegrass countryside has been widely published and diffused through literature on the region, and is instantly recognizable. A closer examination would, however, reveal that this image is also represented in the region’s everyday landscape — in the homes, shopping malls, and civic spaces of its cities and towns. The strong regional image associated with Bluegrass horse farms today includes limestone fences and formal stone entryways, large frontal green lawn areas, formal, tree-lined entry drives, post-rail fences, and lanterns and cupola elements on the tops of roof structures. Together these elements constitute part of the landscape symbol vocabulary of the Bluegrass Region.
One element of that landscape that has received special attention in contemporary constructions is the region’s limestone fences. They are built with increasing frequency in every more varied contexts as references to the popular symbol of the horse farm, the local distinctiveness of dry masonry rock fences, and the larger cultural heritage of Central Kentucky. But, by recreating these fences as symbols of regional heritage, those who recreate them necessarily instill their own values and meaning into the landscape.

For the sake of clarity, I shall refer to these walls henceforth as post facto walls. Contemporary walls can be defined as post facto in several ways: with few exceptions, they no longer serve as functional enclosures, functioning instead purely as symbols; they exist in varied contexts, unlike their historic counterparts, whose origins were tied to the life and landscape of the farm; their form varies wildly from example to example and cannot be easily traced to a particular historic precedent: cut and shaped stone has been substituted for roughly quarried native limestone, and mortared concrete masonry units for dry-laid techniques. At their best, post facto walls are visually accurate facsimiles, at worst, an irreverent and eclectic mix of historic form, modern construction, and symbolic content. Contemporary retail spaces provide perhaps the best starting point for understanding the way in which post fact walls’ suburban context has transformed their form and meaning in the landscape. Commercial landscapes have increasingly been designed as landscapes of aspiration. Such an image is highly compatible with that of the rural Bluegrass landscape, which still remains a largely inaccessible landscape to the average citizen. The attraction of exotic places and distant locales has resulted in the use of “iconic metonyms, or objects which function as signs of other places and times … metaphors for the spatial experience of other places” in order to elicit an associative attitude in the shopper in a retail environment (Goss, 1993, 40). Longstreth (1997, 269) documents inter-war community shopping centers such as Country Club Plaza in Kansas City, Missouri, and Highland Park Village in Highland Park, Texas, that “projected a highly idealized image of a preindustrial village” as an ideal form of community to which its suburban residents aspired. More recently, Cosgrove (1997, 99) has elaborated on contemporary landscapes where “architectural references … in the recycled heritage landscapes of cities … are a key element in the success of spaces designed for consumption.”

It is no small wonder, then, that the idealized gentry landscape of post-bellum Bluegrass estates has been so thoroughly incorporated into the commercial developments that have slowly begun to replace them. If not as distant or exotic for the middle and upper-middle class residents of the suburbs of Central Kentucky as, say, a reconstructed Parisian streetscape or Spanish-colonial architecture, the aristocratic horse farms surrounding them are nonetheless socially distant places. The carefully manicured nature of Bluegrass horse farms is for the passerby a landscape of aspiration, a place desirable yet unattainable without a significant investment of wealth, time, and land. The shopping center, like the horse estate, viewed through the eyes of less affluent citizens, is also a site of conspicuous material and symbolic production in the landscape.

Though the common traits of commercial and gentry landscapes are apparent in hindsight, their incorporation in landscapes of consumption was slow to gain prominence in Central Kentucky. The first shopping center to incorporate post facto walls in its design (Stonewall Center) was not constructed until 1964, and the idea was not fully embraced by producers of the Bluegrass landscape until the last decade of the twentieth century. This delay can be attributed to several factors.

First, the symbol vocabulary of the region through which much of the symbolic production related to shopping centers was to occur was still under development until the Second World War. The diffusion of the Bluegrass estate image from George Widener’s steeplechase barn in Pennsylvania to local farms, Calumet, Dixiana, and Elmendorf, continued until the 1930s (Raitz and Van Dommelen, 1990, 115-16). Given that this modern landscape image was not recreated wholesale in new horse estates until the 1970s, it is no surprise that its use in shopping centers was even slower to be adopted.

Second, postwar commercial development in America, as opposed to its interwar precedents, employed minimal, modern exteriors as opposed to ornate historical reproductions. Longstreth (1997, 289) attributes this shift away from historicizing exteriors to “changes in taste, coupled with steady rises in the cost of construction and the allocation of a greater percentage of that cost to building systems and to equipment for display.” The drive for utility replaced earlier efforts at creating “distinct signifiers of place” and the historicizing forces that had provided the vehicle for doing so.

Incorporating the region’s landscape symbol vocabulary in commercial developments was, therefore, a slowly evolving process, beginning in the mid-to-late 1960s and reaching a local predominance in the urban and suburban landscape some thirty to forty years later. The evolving use of horse barn cupolas and Palladian architectural motifs in the shopping centers of Lexington during this time has been documented elsewhere (Raitz and Van Dommelen, 1990, 116-118). The earliest attempts at incorporating these landscape symbol elements into retail development yielded highly abstract interpretations of traditional architectural forms. Whether through popular acceptance or the increasing familiarity of architects and planners with regional architectural forms, newer shopping centers incorporated increasingly bolder and more “authentic” reproductions of the Bluegrass landscape symbol vocabulary.

The incorporation of post facto walls into the region’s retail developments follows a similar evolutionary trajectory — from subtle suggestion to practiced manipulation. Given the interrelated nature of the various aspects of the region’s symbol vocabulary, such similarities should be expected. Yet the differences in development between the two can also shed light on the nature of the stone wall as a symbolic
To understand the changing relationship of the stone wall to commercial developments, three sites will be considered. The first, Stonewall Center built in 1964, was among the first "strip mall" shopping centers to be built in Lexington. The second, the re-skinned Turfland Mall, renovated in 1997, will be presented as an example of the growing trend of refitting existing shopping centers and malls with elements of the landscape symbol vocabulary, in which the stone wall is a prominent feature. Finally, early 1990s Palomar Centre will be used to illustrate the radical change in the application of stone walls in the twenty-five years separating it from Stonewall Center. That these three commercial spaces are located in close proximity to one another provides both a useful comparative tool and an unavoidable necessity. Their location along major corridors in the south of Lexington reflects the history of development in Lexington during the second half of the twentieth century and the audience for which reinterpreted stone walls have become desirable landscape elements in middle and upper-middle class suburban neighborhoods.

Stonewall Center lies on Clays Mill Road in Lexington, just beyond the circular beltway that divides the inner-half of the city from the post-1960s suburban outer-half. In a trend common at the time, the shopping center and its surrounding community take their name and much of the stone used for their construction from the farmland they replaced. The center was conceived of as a community shopping center to serve the needs of the growing suburban developments along the Clays Mill corridor. Like many commercial developments of the time, Stonewall Center was opposed by many members of the community (Williamson, 1967, 52).

Aside from changing tenants, the shopping center appears today much as it did at the time of its construction. The building itself is an unadorned concrete "shoebox" typical of shopping centers across the country. What small connection the shopping center evokes to a regional image occurs at its entry (Figure 1). Compared to many contemporary constructions, the Stonewall Center’s use of stone is modest and somewhat a-historical. The wall, which is typical of early post-facto walls, occupies the median of the parking lot’s entry road and is constructed without coping. Its horizontal bands of stone resemble in scale the dry-laid masonry of historic rock fences, but do not attempt to hide their mortared nature. The stones themselves constitute a literal "recycled landscape" in that they originate from an older fence. The stone wall, significantly, appears only at the entryway and not at the frontage.

Stonewall Center presents a number of features that would be important in the use of the regional landscape vocabulary in future commercial developments. First, the symbolic landscape elements (here being a stone wall) are associated not with the building, but the landscaping fronting the parking lot. Second, the symbolic content, evoking the history of the site and the traditional form of dry-stone masonry, is clustered around the sign that designates the name and entry of the shopping center.

This pattern can be seen repeated and elaborated in the refitting of Lexington’s oldest indoor shopping mall. Turfland Mall opened in 1964 alongside the expanding residential developments of Harrodsburg Road. It was the first shopping mall built in Lexington and was soon followed by Fayette Mall in 1971 and Lexington Mall in 1975. None of these regional malls originally incorporated elements of the landscape symbol vocabulary, which was at the time employed mainly in the construction of new horse estates and farms in the countryside, including non-farm...
applications of a regional idealized landscape in places such as the Kentucky Horse Park.

Like many early suburban regional malls, the image of Turfland Mall was anything but regional. Its low, linear roof-line, brick façade, and surrounding parking lot set in a sea of newly-developed residential neighborhoods could be found almost anywhere in the United States in the 1960s and 70s. Like nearly every other shopping mall in the nation, Turfland Mall saw changing stores, occasional vacancies, and new growth. For thirty years, the mall’s character remained virtually unchanged; it saw a minor renovation in 1988 and the loss of one of its major anchor department stores in the early 1990s.

In 1997, the Rubloff Development Group of Hoffman Estates, Illinois, purchased Turfland Mall. The Lexington Herald-Leader described the $5 million renovation of Turfland Mall as including “construction of faux roofs in varying heights to give the 1960s linear-style mall a more dynamic look.” (Baldwin, 1998) Yet, more than simply increasing its attractiveness or “newness,” the renovation of Turfland Mall established a consumer-oriented landscape that utilized selective elements of the region’s landscape symbol vocabulary. The “new” Turfland Mall with its surrounding landscape featuring a veneered-stone entry sign (Figure 2), post-rail fences, and tree-lined driveways, became a precedent for the region’s other existing malls, as evidenced by the recent renovation of Fayette Mall, which employs cast-in-place concrete retaining walls with stone patterning along its entryway. Just as Turfland was Lexington’s first regional mall, so, too, it became Lexington’s first “regional image” mall.

Compared to many other shopping centers such as Lexington Green and Goodwin Square in Lexington, which incorporate rural horse-barn and neo-Palladian architectural elements in their buildings, the Turfland Mall façade remains less regionally symbolic (Raitz and Van Dommelen, 1990, 117-18). Instead its surroundings — namely the parking lot that borders Harrodsburg Road — have become the major symbolic space.

The mall’s most visible image from the street is its Post Modern, classically-styled entry sign (Figure 2). Though its neo-classical shallow-arched top and oversized rusticated sides speak little to the regional image of Central Kentucky, the veneered stone base upon which it rests indicate the mall’s sensitivity to the landscape symbol vocabulary of the region. The stone veneer patterning utilizes the dry-laid-look common to many post facto walls.

Sensitivity to the local landscape is also evoked in the mall parking lot, which is separated from the street by a post and rail fence resembling those found throughout the Bluegrass Region. The fence and surrounding trees shield the parked cars from the view along the street while creating a scene that is at least partly recognizable as part of the Bluegrass landscape vocabulary. To the extent that many nearby properties incorporate traditional residential stone walls and post-rail fences, the streetscape of the Turfland Mall also seeks to re-integrate the once bland suburban shopping mall with the city’s existing fabric.

But, Turfland Mall’s regional symbolism extends beyond its constituent parts. The parking lot in fact reinterprets the processional entry of the traditional Bluegrass estate. According to Raitz and Van Dommelen (1990, 112), the use of woodlands in nineteenth-century Bluegrass estates “can be traced to a long tradition of English practice where the same land was used for both trees and grazing.” This practice eventually transformed into the manufacture of wooded lanes, both along public

Figure 2:
Turfland Mall entry sign
Source: author
roads (such as the numerous turnpikes of Central Kentucky) and private country lanes. Most often this landscape incorporated a linear arrangement of trees along the entry road, flanked on the property’s frontage by a stone wall, a post-rail fence, or a combination of the two.

The Turfland Mall parking lot reconstitutes a regional landscape in a machine space, changing the scale and positioning of elements to suit their re-interpreted context and symbolism (Figure 3). The trees that line the four-lane entry drive are planted in the medians that divide the parking spaces from the entry road; similar to the trees along Harrodsburg road, this landscape design feature allows for a sense of neatness, effectively hiding the cars from sight from a passing vehicle. The median dividing the two lanes of the entry road is occupied by miniature post-rail fences with small stone end posts, as if the entry drive was a landscape in miniature, compressed to the width of a three-feet median planter. These miniature fences reinforce the symbolic quality of each part, identifying them as two distinct elements of the Bluegrass landscape that work together to create a regional image. Yet the fences are likely necessitated by the extraordinary width of the road, which would look barren without them.

Contemporary stone veneer construction techniques have increased the range of surfaces on which traditional stone wall symbolism can be employed. This development has allowed the stone to become a symbolic surface detached from its context as a free-standing wall. Early attempts at employing this extended post facto wall were manifested as cladding for the exterior of houses and other buildings, as previously mentioned. In contemporary retail spaces, however, the use of stone veneer outside of its traditional context has resulted in ostentatious use of the material in scale and context. Such constructions seek to equate the quantity and use of limestone with an increased perception of amenity.

This isolation of the symbolic surface from its traditional form in post facto walls is demonstrated best by the Palomar Center, a shopping center designed to service upper-middle class planned neighborhoods in south Lexington. The surrounding neighborhoods are represented by a community organization that regulates many aspects of the neighborhood, from consolidating garbage pickup times to maintaining consistent mailboxes. The center was built in 1989, shortly after the neighborhood development began construction, in order to cater to these neighborhoods.

The major road frontages are marked by over-scaled stone walls that incorporate the center’s signage into the wall. The shopping center uses stone as a signifier of status in the manner of turn-of-the century Bluegrass estates through the exaggerated scale and application of stone veneer. The columns along the store frontage of the shopping center are veneered in limestone of a similarly small-scaled ashlar pattern seen in many post facto walls. The structure’s oversized, postmodern pediments call attention to the anchor stores of the center.

In a process similar to the way in which national chains have been “coopted by local interests and incorporated into their sense of place” along interstate highways, the free-standing chain service buildings in Palomar Center are clad in limestone (Schein, 1996, 392) (Figure 4). The exuberant use of materials on these buildings, in addition to defining their locality, raises the status of the otherwise recognizable elements of the everyday landscape at the Palomar Centre; the use of nationally recognizable restaurant chains in their standard configuration with non-standard materials sets the center apart from its nearby competitors. Unlike either of the
two shopping centers mentioned previously, Palomar Center employs cultural artifacts as a means of indicating amenity, thus instilling in post facto walls some of the elite meaning originally associated with their rural precedents.

Examining these three retail spaces and their surrounding landscapes brings several important aspects of the use of post facto walls in a contemporary suburban context into focus. The maxim of shopping center construction seems to be newer is better. In the spirit of constant renewal, malls and shopping centers are often renovated inside and out within ten to fifteen years of their construction. Thus, commercial spaces are particularly indicative of the values of landscape producers at the time of their production. That there was no significant use of the region’s landscape symbol vocabulary in retail spaces from the 1970s to the late 1980s is a sign of values of that particular time. The renovation of Turfland Mall can, therefore, be seen as indicative of significant changes to the larger culture of consumerism in the Bluegrass Region. If the intention of its developers was to update Turfland Mall to a contemporary standard, expressing the view that “malls need to keep current,” then its renovation necessarily expresses those values that are most contemporary to the Bluegrass Region: namely, the representation of its past through landscape design (Baldwin, 1997).

Also, the meaning of the stone wall as a symbol seems to be dependent upon the context and scale (both in the sense of size and quantity) in which it is employed. For example, examining the amount of stone veneer constructed in each of the three examples presented in this paper, there seems to be no correlation of the increasing use of stone over time, as might be expected. Rather, the use of stone in a particular commercial site seems to correspond to its targeted consumer audience. The conservative use of stone at both the Stonewall Center and Turfland Mall indicate an interest in regional distinction without the exorbitant costs associated with limestone construction. Granted, these two shopping centers do to varying degrees invest in other components of the landscape symbol vocabulary (such as post and rail fences, etc.) that also aid in the establishment of a particular identity. Palomar Centre, on the other hand uses traditional materials in non-traditional ways in order to become a landscape of aspiration. The use of an unfamiliar material (stone) on a familiar structure such as McDonalds provides just the sort of exotic, “alternate” shopping experience that Goss describes as defining the contemporary retail environment.

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Works Cited


