



I should say for those who have kids that such a plan to spend six days together side by side in a SUV could have gone many ways, but our experience was wonderful and thanks to cruise control, Pandora, Advil and, yes, even Google, we made the journey in relative ease. A lot struck me since those days long ago when I first made the trip as a student, especially how many physical aspects of the country have changed and how my understanding as an architect had changed too.



### **The Start from Boston 6.10.18**

The first difference I noticed was the sheer volume of commercial enterprise. When I made my first trip cross country, mom and pop restaurants and local stores and small gas stations were the norm. Now, tall masted signs dominate the landscape at most highway intersections, advertising not only gas but also national chain restaurants and hotels. If we had wanted to, we could have eaten and stayed overnight at the same chain restaurant and hotel at every stop. We're indeed a far-flung, homogenized consumer culture, and it was reflected everywhere in our physical environment along our road to the west coast.

Nothing seems to represent this increased commercial volume more than the seemingly endless truck traffic. In many places, trucks outnumbered cars, and for sure, the **Kenworths** and **Peterbilts** of this century are not what they use to be in the last century. The dashboard of these so-called eighteen wheelers resemble the instrumentation of an airplane and I came to appreciate the skill of the men and women who carry goods across our landscape. For many, these trucks are their homes for days on end and the luxury of their interiors is extraordinary. Truck stops are packed with trucks of all shapes and sizes, and sometimes men and women even travel together.

That realization probably shouldn't have surprised me, given the ever-expanding economy of the last four decades, but when you're traveling at 70, 75 and...out west...80 mph or more and there are hoards of trucks coming and going in both directions, you realize most emphatically how dependent our country is on commercial transactions and how heavily dependent we are on the transportation by trucks. Now and then, we saw long trains, but trucks were the dominant feature of the road.



**18-wheeler in the rear view mirror**



**Kenworth 18 wheeler dashboard**

Still, the landscape itself, as we traveled from east to west, hadn't changed much as I remembered it. It is still magnificent, with rolling farmlands, lush rivers, arid desert and high range mountains. It might be corny, but I wanted to break out in a few verses of **"This Land is Your Land"** as we marveled at it all along the way. Unfortunately, what I also discovered was the boring sameness of much of the physical environment built since my last trip. We made an effort to stay in small towns when possible but even they were often dominated by the corporate culture of Hilton, Holiday Inn and Hampstead and, as you might imagine, they all looked the same no matter what region we were in. The strip where these boxes sat was the first thing you encountered while the older, original small town seem to lie in atrophy, often designated as an "Historic District" though often empty of any significant commercial enterprise.

We resisted the temptation to allow our trip to settle into a corporate sameness and we pushed on wherever possible into the core of the original town most often choosing a mom & pop motel when we could find one or eating in a small restaurant in the center of the old town. We secretly hoped we were saving them for future generations, but that may be naïve.



**The Commercial Strip, Aurora Nebraska**



**Our motel, Aurora, Nebraska**



**Old town center, Aurora, Nebraska**

Four decades ago there were virtually no branded hotels or chain restaurants. Back then, I learned to like coffee and pie as we made our way from restaurant to restaurant in small towns. I am by no means the first to notice that has all changed, but seeing it first hand in town after town after living in Boston for all these years somehow startled me. I had come to imagine the Rt. 1 strip just north of Boston was an anomaly and a minor fragment in the typical makeup of our cities and towns and not a kind of branded, monolithic, one generic style fits all.

**Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour** first published *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972, before I made my first trip. However interesting their theories were as a student, they seemed to me at the time, just that, *theories*. Certainly, Las Vegas

was one thing, and a duck a duck, but most American cities and towns were another. Or so I thought. For better or worse, this trip made me realize how prescient that book was and how the theory has become in large part our built reality.

There is apparently a movement afoot to revitalize our small towns by young entrepreneurs and some hope that this effort will be an antidote to the sterile sameness we have created. After what we saw, I'm not so sure. As we've increased our connectedness not just digitally but physically, the core has been stretched and often shattered. I wish it were otherwise, but corporate America is putting the squeeze on what we as architects want most: a sense of place engendered by region, climate and indigenous populations.



**The commercial strip, Winnemucca, Nevada**

My last observation and in some ways the saddest was the sameness of many of the new houses we saw. Like the chain hotels and restaurants along the strips we passed through, it really didn't matter what state or region you were in. Any house could have been anywhere. Except for a few historical examples, a house tuned to the environment with a distinctive style was nowhere to be found. I had sensed this tendency during my first trip four decades ago, but the phenomenon of sameness now exceeded even my own current expectations. The vast momentum of commercial American has thoroughly infested our house culture as well.

I guess I should be pleased that the country has prospered over the last four decades because the fruits of that prosperity has fueled my own practice as an architect. But the trip made me wonder if something has also been lost. While the vast magnificent landscape is still there, the built world we have created has dulled that landscape and introduced an alternative environment devoid of any relationship to region, climate or local conditions. It was clear that my generation has, in many ways, sold out to the vast commercial enterprise of America. But I was also left with the hope that my daughter's generation could begin to turn it around with their dedication to a better environment. America, after all, is very much about change, and our trip proved it.

*All photos by the author.*

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