



Traversing the Unending Plane

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Using the method of interpreting space found in John Lane's *Circling Home*, a superimposed, circular boundary (one mile in radius) is drawn on a topographical map to determine the land to be explored and studied. Mapping and intricately describing the observations during the excursion provides a deepened knowledge of place both mentally and physically.

The region under examination is the Llano Estacado, which is found across the northwestern region of Texas and northeastern region of New Mexico. This islanded terrain stretches from the Canadian River in the north to the Edwards Plateau in the south, and from the Pecos River in the west to the canyonlands of the Brazos and Colorado Rivers in the east. Implementing a confined circle of study within the vast 37,500 square mile region allows for a more direct land analysis and a placement of scale. The area of focus lies within the Muleshoe National Wildlife Reserve.



When first encountering the landscape within the perimeter of study, the topography is easily misconstrued as flat. A sea of grass and weeds stretches across the terrain until it meets the intersection of earth and sky—an unending plane. The grass grows in tussocks and flattens into waves with the ever-present gusts of wind. Each tuft yellows under the sun and between each is bare, powdery dirt. What once seemed a flat and simplistic landscape reveals multiple textures and inconsistencies. As each step is made between the grass and weeds, the arid floor responds—subsequently exhaling a small breath of dust. The residue settles against clothing and exposed skin, attesting to the withered dryness of the land and the need for substantial moisture. Along the parched crust are striations of erosion and evidence of animal traffic, which create an earthly palimpsest of past interactions. The grassy sea, obeying the commands of the shifting winds, divulges a submerged ecosystem of bustling cottontails and marching red soldiers.

The unending plane of the Llano is gently divided by barbed wire and farm-plotted boundaries. Without these subtle hints of enclosure, the vastness of the desolate land would prevent any consideration of distance, scale, and place within the seemingly flat environmental canvas. The sequential spacing of fence posts serves as a prolonged ruler that measures the enormous mesa. The thinness of the territorial boundaries allows for the land to be visualized as both a singular plane and a collection of fragmented properties. Even when the pace of the exploration slows and the distance between each step grows shorter, the unending plane is relentlessly fed from the distant horizon.

The question that arises from this exploration is where does architecture fit into the Llano Estacado? The architect must decide how to relate a new built environment within the existing context. Placing a structure within the seemingly simplistic setting requires each move to be precise and skillful. Whatever so-called “style” an architect decides to use with a



design should embody a vital formula and source of discipline, from which the architect can then translate a solution. The architecture in the Llano Estacado must not come off as an intrusion, but rather an interpretation. Therefore, an architectural language must be developed that directly relates the newly introduced design to and within the existing rural context. Simply placing a building within a site is not enough. The environment, from a majestic to a microscopic scale, requires a more direct and intimate development.

Physically interacting with the land, consciously being attentive to the experience, and evocatively describing the outcome allows one to cultivate a deeper sense of spatial understanding. From this understanding, a set of architectural principles are developed to directly relate the architecture to the site. Using these principles, the architect can articulate the details of the site within the design, thus allowing the Llano to receive and accept the building.

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