

The Pit and the Stack: Decoding the Southwestern Montana Landscape

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Many observers of the northern Rockies believe that the region's architecture has difficulty competing with the vastness and grandeur of the landscape itself. Those who write talk about the ruggedness of the mountains, the starkness of the plains, and the emptiness of endless space, but they have few words for the interplay of buildings, structures, and things within that environment unless they are like the forests and mountains themselves: writers wax eloquently about the mammoth "rustic" designs from Robert Reamer, Gilbert Underwood, and others in the nearby national parks but typically ignore the rest of the state's architecture, except when they throw out such descriptors as *quaint*, *picturesque*, and *abandoned*.¹

In Montana, the space is so big that what residents built to control that space sometimes seems lost, even inconsequential. At the same time, for travelers close to the ground, the relative emptiness of the space means that buildings, districts, and structures have more prominence, begging for an explanation of how and why they got there.

A part of the answer is easy. Certainly much of the surviving historic architecture repeats patterns found in other eastern and midwestern states. Montana, after all, did not receive its first large batch



The Washoe Stack, Anaconda, Montana, 1942. Photograph by R. I. Nesmith. Courtesy Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, Helena (Lot 19 Ara).

of permanent Euro-American residents until the 1860s and 1870s. The new residents brought along what they had in St. Paul, or St. Louis, or Detroit. But the larger part of the answer is much more difficult to discern today. In his recent study of Montana landscapes, geographer William Wyckoff admits “how difficult it is to make sense of the landscapes around us,” especially since “the features that survive on the scene today are sometimes bare, always selective fragments of what happened in the place.”² Nowhere is the tension between what is there now and what was there yesterday greater than in Butte and Anaconda.

At first encounter, the preserved and revitalized Butte and Anaconda are truly sights to see. A generation of work from committed and gifted preservationists, historians, artists, urban planners, and neighborhood activists has transformed the towns. Historic districts and successful renovations abound. The National Park Service designated the Butte-Anaconda National Historic Landmark in 2006.

Many important buildings, structures, and sites remain; there is a high integrity to the place, as preservationists like to say. Decades of meaningful preservation can take place here. Yet, the truth of Butte and Anaconda’s past is far more difficult to see. The success of preservation can obscure the realities of unchecked industrial power on the western landscape.

Progress, prosperity, destruction, exploitation:

you can choose the terms of the debate, as writers did one hundred years ago. Past boosters chose the first two words—for example, Henry C. Freeman’s *A Brief History of Butte, Montana* (1900) found Butte to be a cultural and economic marvel, a model of development for all of the Rockies. The mass media press was dominated by similar declarations of community stability, even beauty.³

Others who wrote found the landscape alien, even distasteful. In a postcard sent to a friend in 1908, Will Rogers wisecracked: “Beautiful scenery. there aint a tree in 10 miles.”⁴ A few years earlier, a youthful Mary MacLane was more graphic in communicating her disgust: “Butte and its immediate vicinity present as ugly an outlook as one could wish to see. It is so ugly indeed that it is near the perfection of ugliness.”⁵

Dashiell Hammett, who fictionalized Butte and Anaconda, and probably a couple of other western abodes, into the town Personville in his novel *Red Harvest* (1929), wrote:

[The] city wasn’t pretty. Most of its builders had gone in for gaudiness. Maybe they had been successful at first. Since then the smelters whose brick stacks stuck up tall against a gloomy mountain to the south had yellow-smoked everything into uniform dinginess. The result was an ugly city of



Meaderville and the Berkeley Pit, 1959. Photograph by Al Hooper, Butte, Montana. Courtesy of World Museum of Mining, Butte (Photo 582&A).

forty thousand people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains that had been dirtied up by mining. Spread over this was a grimy sky that looked as if it had come out of the smelters' stacks.⁶

Thankfully, the air is much cleaner today, and reforestation and other environmental projects have reclaimed some of the damaged land. Butte and Silver Bow County in fact market themselves as part of the state's greater natural and recreational beauties. However, two structures in particular remain to convey a sense of historical reality, to remind anyone of what building the West was actually about. Butte and Anaconda's surrounding snow-capped mountains may take center stage—until the eyes see that great gash in the landscape (the Berkeley Pit) or that great finger of industrial capitalism (the Anaconda Stack) soaring skyward, surrounded by its mounds of industrial waste. Once burned into your eyes, the Pit and the Stack remain part of whatever architectural understanding you take away from this western place.

The Washoe Stack came first, built by the Alphonis Chimney Construction Company for the Anaconda Copper Mining Company in 1918. The stack is 585 feet high, 60 feet wide at the top with an interior diameter of 75 feet. Few industrial structures anywhere compare to it. The stack loomed over the company,

its workers, its region, and its state as the Anaconda company owned and ran Montana as “a commonwealth where one corporation ruled supreme.”⁷

The company's power only continued to grow through the middle decades of the century; by the 1950s, it had decided to take its next great step—open pit mining—which destroyed thriving neighborhoods in Butte in exchange for another generation of work. The Berkeley Pit opened in 1955. By the end of its life, almost thirty years later, the Pit had grown to 7,000 feet long, 5,500 feet wide, and at least 1,800 feet deep. On a good day, miners and their mammoth machines dug out fifty thousand tons of rock and ore. As one local writer observed in 1988: “The Pit gave Butte an unique position in the history of American cities: the only town both created and then, in good part, actually physically destroyed by the industry that created it.” The Pit eventually claimed the communities of Meaderville and McQueen along with portions of Finntown and Dublin Gulch.⁸

The Pit and the Stack are significant reminders of how industrial power shaped the landscape of and between Butte and Anaconda. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan observed that “as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, the scale of power was tipped in man's favor. He proceeded to outrage the land with coal dumps and urban sprawls.”⁹ The transformation first occurred in the English countryside and then, with particular brutality,

in the New World landscape of the twentieth century, where new technology combined with modern consumer desires to create insatiable markets for natural resources. Nature might never be conquered, but the new machines could destroy it and replace it with a new, engineered landscape that experts could control.

The Pit and the Stack are among the West's most defining structures—corporate acts of will—that broke forever the scale of the Montana landscape, leaving no doubt that modern life could tame the West only by destroying it and creating in its stead huge machines capable of plundering its treasures.

To those who worked the mine and smelter, those landmarks governed their lives.¹⁰ Historian Laurie Mercier spoke with Bob Vine, who believed that the Company and God were all the same in Anaconda: “Everybody would get up in the morning and they look and see if there was smoke coming out of that stack and if there was, God was in his heaven and all was right with the world, and we knew we were going to have a paycheck.”¹¹ In the 1980s, the Atlantic Richfield Corporation, a later owner of the Washoe works, announced the stack's closing and possible demolition. A community-wide effort to save the stack was launched because, in the poetic words of local union activist Tom Dickson:

ARCO save that stack, touch not a single brick
Signify the livelihood that made Anaconda tick.

Still let it stand there stark against the sky,
Like a somewhat obscene gesture catching every eye.¹²

Those who worked in the Pit sometimes reacted in horror to what their daily tasks meant for the historic landscape in being moved or even buried, intact and still alive. Pit truck driver Bill Long wrote: “When I dumped a load on the beautiful Holy Savior School in McQueen, I watched in my rearview mirror as tons of huge boulders and dirt slammed into the side of the multi-story building. It withstood the onslaught with only a barely discernable shudder. My heart was heavy as I pulled away. I felt like a murderer.”¹³

What you encounter in today's Butte and Anaconda, as well as with the surrounding countryside and communities, is not unique to Montana. The degree is different here, but the story line is one found throughout the northern Rockies. As the region has been mined, farmed, and developed since the mid-nineteenth century, great disparity has existed between those who work the land and those who own and control it. The two worlds might be at odds, or they might strike an uneasy coexistence within the landscape. A good place to start in understanding and appreciating the region's architectural traditions is to accept how the machine embodied in modern corporate capital culture rearranged places and lives in the name of order, prosperity, destruction, and revitalization.

- ¹ Ruth Quinn, *Weaver of Dreams: The Life and Architecture of Robert C. Reamer* (Bozeman, MT: Leslie and Ruth Quinn, Publishers, 2004); David A. Naylor, "Old Faithful Inn and Its Legacy: The Vernacular Transformed" (master's thesis, Cornell University, 1990); Harvey Kaiser, *Landmarks in the Landscape: Historic Architecture in the National Parks of the West* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1997); Linda McClelland, *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
- ² William Wyckoff, *On the Road Again: Montana's Changing Landscapes* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), xiv.
- ³ As historian Timothy F. LeCain points out, these images of Butte the Bountiful continued well into the twentieth century. See his "See America the Bountiful: Butte's Berkeley Pit and the American Culture of Consumption," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 56 (Winter 2006): 5–17.
- ⁴ Will Rogers to Betty Blake, June 17, 1909, in *The Papers of Will Rogers: Wild West and Vaudeville, Vol. Two: April 1904–September 1908*, ed. Arthur F. Wertheim and Barbara Bair (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 433n.
- ⁵ Mary MacLane, *The Story of Mary MacLane by Herself* (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone, 1902), 10.
- ⁶ Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest* (1929; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1992), 3–4.
- ⁷ Michael P. Malone and Richard P. Roeder, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976), 177; Carroll V. West, *A Travelers' Companion to Montana History* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1986), 173.
- ⁸ Steve Devitt, *Butte: The Town and the People* (Helena, MT: American Geographic Publishing, 1988), 55–56; West, *A Travelers' Companion to Montana History*, 173.
- ⁹ Yi-Fu Tuan, "Thought and Landscape: The Eye and the Mind's Eye," in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. D. W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 92.
- ¹⁰ Two excellent studies of the mining culture in Butte and Anaconda are Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914–41* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Laurie Mercier, *Anaconda: Labor, Community, and Culture in Montana's Smelter City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
- ¹¹ Mercier, *Anaconda*, 1.
- ¹² Dickson's poem is cited in Mercier, *Anaconda*, 217.
- ¹³ Bill Long, "Driving Haul Trucks in the Berkeley Pit: Reminiscences of a Gritty Job," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 56 (Winter 2006): 58.