



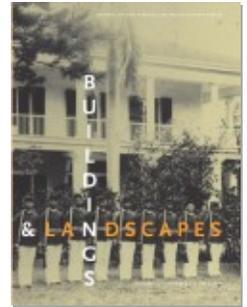
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*From the Miners' Doublehouse: Archaeology and Landscape in a Pennsylvania Company Town* (review)

Charlie Hailey

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Karen Metheny

***From the Miners' Doublehouse:  
Archaeology and Landscape in a  
Pennsylvania Company Town***

Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006.

360 pages, black and white illustrations.

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Review by Charlie Hailey

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Company towns in the United States accommodated two million residents in 1930. That a population exceeding the residency of entire states such as Kansas and Maryland could be held within the intricate web of corporate paternalism and welfare capitalism makes the company town and its related settlements profoundly important subjects for cross-disciplinary treatment. Karen Bescherer Metheny's book *From the Miners' Doublehouse: Archaeology and Landscape in a Pennsylvania Company Town* makes significant contributions to a growing body of research, to its methodologies, and to the understanding of provisional settlements' legacies in our present age.

The broad subject of *From the Miners' Doublehouse* is industrial relations within the cultural landscape. In the work, culture and landscape are certainly understood together, but they also form distinct disciplinary frames of ethnographically studied cultures and archaeologically investigated landscapes. Metheny seeks to understand the nature of the miners' experience within the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' industrial landscape. In much of the existing research of turn-of-the-century working-class families, she notes an "institutional bias" (toward company power structure) that has resulted in a gap of knowledge about workers' lives. The company town of Helvetia, Pennsylvania, and its parent company Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company make up the primary case for examining worker agency and working-class behavior.

From the outset, Metheny argues that workers themselves have stories to tell and that when their experiences are narrated we might begin to understand the full complex of interactions between company power, worker life, and physical environment. The industrial regimen without doubt influenced workers' lives, but they were also active agents in defining their cultural and physical landscape and, in turn, company dynamics. This emphasis on worker agency sets up a frame for reviewing not only *what* was made but also *how* and *why* the practices and artifacts were enacted and used. Identity and environment, rather than passively received, are constructed.

Metheny has successfully bridged between historical archaeology and ethnography. The oral histories that make up the latter allow for glimpses of recreational practices, community diversity, and daily working life in the present work and also provide an indispensable resource for future researchers. Metheny adapts a framework of "archaeological studies of the worker" that is "informed by social theory" but at the same time critiques assumptions that power only results in a worker-as-victim model. A fascinating discussion of "culture as discourse" helps further outline the investigative methods, but only indirect references to key figures of scholarly discussion weaken the potential of this particular section in the book. Passing references to Michel Foucault and Paul Ricoeur via secondary sources and commentators (in Foucault's case, through Christopher Tilley's work) limit what could be a more intensive treatment of how practice and artifact serve as elements in discourse and in our subsequent understanding of material culture and the complexities of power. With few exceptions though, Metheny's review of the literature is exhaustive and very well interlaced within the book's overall narrative.

The book's organization allows for a comprehensive movement from broad to specific. The introduction provides the necessary framework; and, although the final chapter leaves a few questions about the overall theoretical

framework and its implications for research unanswered, the author provides us with a set of tools apposite for subsequent explorations. Between these sections, the book proceeds agreeably from a well-researched history of the North American company town (in the first chapter) through an examination of worker agency (chapters 2 through 5) to a fascinating analysis of archaeological evidence in the next three chapters. Metheny differentiates the company town from mill towns, industrial villages, and the general label of "industrial settlement." In contrast to these environments, the company town accommodates contradictory views and paradoxical conditions. It is temporary and permanent, enlightened and debased, restricting and yet sometimes empowering.

The appendices provide useful primary resources for understanding corporate paternalism (in the letters of Lucius Robinson) and for rethinking the use of oral histories in contemporary research and the combination of oral data with archaeological investigation. The book's sixty-one illustrations demonstrate the unique range of imagery and artifacts that must be taken into account to understand nonextant sites; they also commemorate the rich complexity of daily life in working communities. A brass pick coal check and a United Mine Workers pin, found near a doublehouse's back door, are two particular artifacts that exemplify readings of the material culture. The former recalls hierarchies of pay scale found in different kinds of mining work (in this case, the pick miners received nearly twice the compensation of machine operators), and the latter references the unionization and resistance of Helvetia's miners.

But these iconic and multifaceted artifacts were rare, and Metheny's focus in chapter 7 on the doublehouse itself provides a deeper understanding of the negotiation of company and worker. The dwellings demonstrate both standardization and the adaptations and modifications carried out by the residents. In particular, front porches sometimes remained intact, in other cases were slightly extended,

and at other times were enclosed to enlarge the interior living space. In its variety of transformations, the porch remained the primary locus of socialization. And if the porches served as the public zone for interaction among residents, then the backlots became not only sites for more individual domestic practices but also a uniquely defined communal space of livestock pasturing. Emblematic of how many Helvetia families viewed company land as common land, an array of barns, pens, and chicken coops were constructed, and livestock were allowed to roam the yards until some residents fenced their backlots. As a result, company administrators redirected husbandry practices to dedicated pastures outside of town and demolished many of the ad hoc outbuildings and fences.

In chapter 8 Metheny further discusses the relationship of identity and landscape, relating gardening practices, cultivation techniques, and plantings to ethnic background. Here, miners' identities, rather than "corporate ideology," determine the landscape. Place is defined *through* landscape—a construct that is then understood in terms of "multilocality," the idea that a multiplicity of experiences can be held within a single location. This fascinating concept is unfortunately left in its germinal definition (one framed previously by Margaret Rodman) and might have helped tie together more explicitly the operative terms redeployed in the final chapter.

Place, discourse, and dialectic—although these critical terms are not fully treated, they do provide a basis for the author's summary of "negotiating place." In this final part (chapter 9), the author uses the term "dialectic" to describe the interaction of Helvetia's mining families and the Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company. Although not explicitly stated, the use of dialectic is not merely dialogic but indeed opens up the possibility that the contradictions found in the town's daily life parallel the challenges, and in some cases the discrepancies, of the research method, which has inventively and successfully drawn from both oral histories and archaeological

evidence. And "discourse" is not only "social discourse" but might also be the full range of discursive practices found in the residents' lives, both in and out of work. The scenes of negotiation outlined in this chapter's last section provide an important inventory of factors for understanding how sense of place might be established. Household economy, kinship networks, ethnicities, and community fabric serve as both site and practice and thus characterize how workers make place within the unique complexities of the company town. We act on (for miners, a quite literal "working" *on* and *within*) the landscape while it transforms us.

The penultimate section titled "Landscape and Memory" successfully sends us out for further research and investigation—in my case, back to Simon Schama's seminal work of the same name. In his work, the natural takes the place of the industrial, but Schama's goals resonate here: how to provide a "way of looking; of rediscovering what we already have. . . . Instead of being yet another explanation of what we have lost, it is an exploration of what we may yet find." The doublehouse serves as such a vehicle not just of recovery but of further speculation about how the vernacular landscape registers enduring settlements and impermanent architecture—the excavation of which comes through what we see but also what we listen to.