

A photograph of a stone doorway leading to a bright, hazy landscape. The doorway is framed by dark, textured stone walls. The floor is made of large, rectangular stone tiles. The view through the doorway is a bright, hazy landscape, possibly a beach or a coastal area, with a clear sky and a distant horizon. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

THE EYE IS A DOOR

Landscape, Photography, and the Art of Discovery

ANNE WHISTON SPIRN

To see is the root of idea
from *Ιδειν* (Greek), to see

“The camera is a tool for seeing without a camera.”
Dorothea Lange

ANNE WHISTON SPIRN is professor of landscape architecture and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is the author of *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design*, *The Language of Landscape*, and *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Reports from the Field*. For more information and links to other publications, see www.annewhistonspirn.com.

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For more material and for color photographs, see www.theeyeisadoor.com.

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Introduction

SEEING IS FOR ME A WAY OF KNOWING, photography a way of thinking. I see most acutely through the frame of the camera's viewfinder and think most fluently through images. The camera is my third eye, its sensor a third retina, its images a form of thought, speech, and memory. What draws my eye most intensely are landscapes, the stories they tell and the ideas they hold and inspire. My camera frames those stories, homing in on significant detail, zooming out to put detail in dialogue with context. Its lens brings ideas into focus. Its images, paired and in sequence, plot a path to discovery.

The Eye Is a Door invites the reader to join in this process of seeing, thinking, and discovery. It is a book of stories and is also a guide to discovering one's own stories. It is for people who want to use the camera to discover and think, as well as to capture a beautiful scene. The book's focus on landscape reflects my own use of photography to study landscape as the mutual shaping of people and place. Landscape is an ideal vehicle for honing the skill of visual thinking; it is always at hand, whether in city, suburb, or countryside, and its meanings are not just metaphorical but real, practical as well as poetic. To read and tell landscape is a skill essential to the design and planning of human settlements, but once acquired, the skill is transferable to other subjects. Strategies of visual thinking—observation, pattern recognition, repatterning—apply to investigating human health, behavior, and society, meteorology, molecular structure, or any other subject, anywhere—in the laboratory or studio, at home or in the field. Visual thinking is a crucial skill, but one that is widely ignored and rarely taught.

Ours is a visual culture, people say. Images proclaim, entertain, urge, and entice: on television and the Internet, in newspapers and magazines, on flyers and billboards. People may be surrounded by imagery, but few interpret those images deeply and critically. To call ours a visual culture is to be impressed by the volume and intensity of images while ignoring the dearth of visual reasoning. Research shows that perception and cognition are intimately linked and that many people can think more fluently and inventively with images than with words or numbers, yet schools rarely teach visual literacy. Indeed, teachers are all too prone to regard the intelligent visual thinkers who

struggle with words or numbers as “disabled.” There is a “visual turn,” scholars say. An outpouring of books and articles on imagery in recent years has promoted programs in visual culture and visual studies, but the focus is on images and their meanings rather than on the *practice of image-making* and its potential to transform understanding. Never have so many people owned cameras, and never have their snapshots been so widely distributed and shared. The world is being recorded, but to what end? Few use the camera as a way to think. Visual thinking is a powerful ability, and photography one of its tools, but that potential is unfulfilled.

The neglect of visual thinking has consequences. Visual illiteracy, the inability to recognize and interpret visible signs and phenomena—whether natural or man-made—and to express an appropriate response is widespread. Wonders and warnings alike go unseen and undetected. Failure to see and appreciate wonders may impoverish the spirit, but failure to perceive and understand warnings threatens well-being and survival. Illness goes undiagnosed when doctors fail to recognize pertinent visual clues. Policies fail to achieve their goals when the authors, relying on statistics and theory rather than firsthand observation, do not recognize underlying causes. Homes and businesses are built on dangerous ground when planners are blind to evidence of the natural forces that shape the city.

I once thought that the failure of city builders to take into account natural processes was due to lack of knowledge, and I wrote my first book, *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design*, to help fill that void. After its publication in 1984, I was surprised by how many people, including scientists and naturalists, resisted or ignored the evidence that cities are part of the natural world. I began to understand that this resistance arose, in part, from an inability to read the signs of ongoing natural processes in landscape. I wrote my next book, *The Language of Landscape*, to help people relearn this fundamental skill. Now I understand that the lack of landscape literacy is part of a larger failure of perception and imagination, with consequences far beyond the design of cities. *The Eye Is a Door* is a sequel to *The Language of Landscape*. The photographs here, alone and in pairs and sequences, present many of the prior book’s arguments and ideas.

This book is the product of personal experience, but it is not a memoir. I agree with the poet Paul Valéry that, sometimes, “it is more useful to speak of what one has experienced than to pretend to a knowledge that is entirely impersonal, an observation with no observer.” “There is no theory,” Valéry wrote, “that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography.”¹ I know, for example, that one can reason with images and without words, because I do so myself. I believe that patterns and the ideas to which they give rise are latent in the world, waiting to be discovered, because I have found them there. I reflect on my own visual thinking through photography as one model of practice, since it is one I know intimately.

I am primarily a visual thinker. Writing, for me, is a process of translation from images to words, and yet I was not exposed to formal visual language until graduate school. Before that, I did not even know such a language existed; I had learned of art as

a medium for self-expression and for recording people and places, but not as a means of reasoning. In college, as an art history major, I learned to analyze images, to perceive the ideas embedded there, and to translate these into words. Art history taught me to see more keenly but not to express my own ideas in images. Only later, in a graduate program in landscape architecture, was I taught to use drawing as a medium of visual thinking, a means to grasp a whole and its parts, to display processes and interactions, and to map out the structure of ideas—a bridge from the landscape-as-it-is to what-it-had-been and to what-it-might-become. But photographs were regarded as useful mainly for documentation and communication, not, like drawing, for critical reasoning, and there existed no manual that addressed how to use photography this way. *The Eye Is a Door* is the guide that I wished for.

Why a door and not a window? A window is something to look through, but a doorway is to pass through; crossing a threshold, one enters a new place. To see, to really see, is to open a door. To pass through that door is to arrive at a new understanding. Thus the titles of the book's three parts: "Threshold" (an essay of photographs), "The Open Door" (an essay of words), and "Passage (an essay of photographs). "Earth Shadow," the prologue, precedes the whole; it describes a wonder that most people never see, one example of the ideas and stories that are embedded in the world, waiting to be discovered and read.

The eight chapters of "The Open Door" expand on the prologue: from photography as a tool of discovery to mastery of its craft, from finding a place to stand to the observation and interpretation of light and color, from the deciphering of significant detail to the drawing out of an idea.

"Photography and the Art of Visual Thinking," the first chapter, describes how photography has been, from its invention, a means of discovery, for scientists and artists alike. "The Craft the Subject Demands" disputes Susan Sontag's denigration of photography as an effortless practice, requiring only "a touch of the finger" to produce "a complete work." The "touch of the finger" is, I explain, but part of a process of observing, reflecting, focusing, editing, printing, and sequencing that may last hours, days, months, even years. The nature of the "complete work" and the craft required to achieve it depend on the photographer's subject. To know where to stand, the subject of the third chapter, is to know oneself and one's subject. Moving several feet, or even a few inches, backward or forward, to one side or the other, up or down, can change the whole story. "Lights of Day, in Season, in Place" explains how light varies in intensity, clarity, and color with place, season, and time of day; how it responds to, exposes, or conceals materials, surfaces, and forms, and creates shadows; how light, in turn, is reflected, absorbed, and transformed by surfaces; how light affects mood; how it can be used to evoke feeling and convey meaning. "What Color Tells" depicts color as far more than an aesthetic consideration: color is information. "Significant Detail" explores how such details, alone and in combination, expose larger patterns. Visual thinking is an art of pattern-seeking, of culling the significant from a welter

of the irrelevant or peripheral. Photographers seek significant detail to serve as metaphor—to stand for a larger whole, to hint at the deeper meaning beneath the surface, to tell a story. “What Is There, Hidden and Real” recounts how a photographer can divine the ideas latent in landscape, the camera a diviner’s rod, and how printing, editing, grouping, and sequencing are also means of drawing out the ideas embodied in photographs. “The Eye Is a Door” concludes the book with a discussion of how photographs and words can open (or close) the doors of perception and of what may be found beyond those doors.

The two photographic essays, “Threshold” and “Passage,” embrace the text of “The Open Door,” each part reinforcing and demonstrating the others. Images and words correspond, but a single photograph represents more than a single idea or story, and each photographic pair and sequence of pairs has its own logic. “Threshold” expands on the prologue’s themes and explores what light and color tell and what significant details reveal about the identity of a place. It begins with landscapes whose patterns are clear and stories easily read (like seashores, deserts, and sacred places), then introduces more intricate dialogues among natural forces and human ideas, values, and actions. “Passage,” which concludes the book, juxtaposes images from different places and times in more complex photographic pairings that portray ideas. Collectively, the pairs plot a sequence of ideas about a language of landscape. My book, *The Language of Landscape*, described, in words, the elements, grammar, poetics, and polemics of this language. “Passage” is an argument for the language of landscape, in the form of a visual poem.

Photographs and texts, when placed on facing pages, tie down the image to the written word, can distract the eye, and may impede or discourage careful looking and deep thinking. Separating photographs and text frees the reader to view the images unencumbered, to discover, to bring into play his or her own memories and associations. Much can be read without the author’s mediation, but some knowledge deepens the reading. I invite the reader to experience the photographs both ways: before and after reading the text. Still, some may wish for fewer words. The norm, in a book of photographs, is for the photographer to offer only a brief statement or to remain silent, and for others to write the accompanying essays. But, as the photographer and writer Wright Morris observed, “Words can be as intrusive in their absence as in their presence.”² For me, writing and photography are intimately linked, one informing the other; my goal is for the words to speak in the same voice as the photographs. My hope is that the text opens up the photographs’ stories without closing down other readings.

Some photographers do write and speak about their subjects, goals, and methods. I have learned much from them and have used their experience to reflect and expand on my own approach. While some readers may question the wisdom of discussing the practices of canonical figures alongside my own, even citing some as models, I hope this juxtaposition, and my reference to selected images by these photographers, will aid the reader. These are but a few of those who have practiced photography as a way of thinking and a method of inquiry. Many others could have served as examples;

this is an introduction to photography as a way of looking at and thinking about landscape, not a comprehensive survey.

To make the book affordable and freely available to students and others for whom the price of a print edition would be prohibitive, I decided to publish *The Eye Is a Door* as an e-book. There are other advantages to the electronic format, including embedded links to the Internet and to photographs discussed in the text, which are indicated by a color rectangle (□). A number inside the rectangle (2, for example) indicates the photograph's location in the photo essays. Rectangles with no accompanying number refer to photographs that are not in the photo essays; these are listed by chapter, in order of appearance, at the back of the book. Clicking on the rectangle will bring up the photograph; clicking again will bring back the text; endnotes function in the same way.

Despite its advantages, the electronic format imposes constraints. The e-book is in its infancy. Formats, reading devices, and means of distribution are evolving rapidly, and some limitations may soon disappear, but that is no comfort when the publication date is now. The formats required by various booksellers and commonly used reading devices, for example, pose conundrums for the designer of a richly illustrated e-book. Should the relation of images and text be controlled in a "fixed" layout or should the design permit "reflowable" text, allowing the reader to customize the typeface, size, and background? Mindful of the reader's comfort and flexibility, I chose the latter for this first edition of *The Eye Is a Door*. For a short guide to considerations in writing and producing a richly illustrated e-book, see my website: www.annewhistonspirn.com. Future advances in e-book technology may well inspire a new edition of *The Eye Is a Door*. Meanwhile, for updates and additional material and for larger color photographs, please visit the book's website: www.theeyeisadoor.com.

PROLOGUE: EARTH SHADOW



1 Uluru. Red Centre, Australia. June 1988.



2 Uluru. Red Centre, Australia. June 1988.



3 Nahant, Massachusetts. October 2002.



4 Nahant, Massachusetts. September 2000.

Earth Shadow

THE FIRST TIME I SAW THE EARTH'S SHADOW, I assumed it was unique to where I was, at Uluru, a mythic spot at the heart of Australia: red rock, sacred place, gathering rare rains— island in a desert sea. The sandstone monolith looms above red sand and catches fire from the rising and the setting sun. At sunset, tourists converge in an immense parking lot; photographers stand on car roofs, cameras on tripods poised to capture the spectacle. I stepped across the rim of that parking lot, where grey asphalt meets red-orange sand, and walked past the crowd into the desert, my camera loaded with Kodachrome, a slow film that required long exposures in the low light. Without a tripod, I worried that my hands might not be steady enough to record what I was seeing as the sun set and the rock blazed, darkened, and faded. The crowd turned back to buses and cars, though the show had just begun: the flaming light faded from the rock, the sky beyond changing from blue to yellow to magenta, a dark blue line appearing along the horizon. I clicked the shutter for the progressively longer exposures, as the dark line widened into a rising band, intensified, faded, then disappeared into an indigo sky. A luminous pink oval hovered over Uluru. Torn between missing something and being left behind, I ran back to a departing bus. [1](#) [2](#)

Later, in the thirty successive sunset pictures, I saw much my eye had overlooked. While I had focused on the red rock, the sky behind was changing from blue to dusky rose. I saw the same pattern of colors ten years later in a photograph by Galen Rowell (“Twilight in the White Mountains, California”) and learned from Rowell’s text that what I had considered a singular wonder unique to Australia’s Uluru happens everywhere on every clear day, and not once but twice. That dark blue band is earth’s shadow.¹ [•](#) Now, on a clear day, I look to the east at sunset, to the west at sunrise, to watch that shadow appear for a few moments at dusk and again at dawn— cast onto the atmosphere by the sun passing below the horizon, merging with the darkening night or disappearing beneath the brightening morning light. The sequence of hues is not exact but varies with the presence and distribution of clouds and airborne dust and moisture. On some evenings it is the intense aqua of a robin’s egg, on others

blue-violet. That cap of pale magenta is the “anti-twilight arch,” a reflection of afterglow. ⁴ Certain moments of color one may never see again.

My home is on a small peninsula down a mile-long, narrow causeway reaching out into Massachusetts Bay ten miles north of Boston. I am mindful of tides, weather, water, light. Offshore to the northeast is Egg Rock, a lightcatcher. One October evening the sea shimmered iridescent; at sunset, a rosy arch lifted in the eastern sky behind Egg Rock and turned the water rose as well. As the earth’s shadow ascended, shallow waves moved toward shore during the slack water at tide’s turn, reflecting parts of the sky. Rocks along the coast darkened. My camera was on the tripod; the shutter blinked, light streaming through the lens, exposing the film for a fraction of a second before the afterglow faded. A photographer knows how fleeting such instants are. “You captured that rare lilac light,” said a friend who lives beside the water. “I’ve lived here all my life, and I’ve never seen this,” said another neighbor who lives two blocks from the shore. ³

“Don’t you like sunsets?” a man protested as I turned my back on a spectacular gaudy sky near Tucson, Arizona, my camera on its tripod pointing east, watching for the earth’s shadow to lift above mountains of pale brown and dark umber across the Sonoran desert. The sky was bluer than the western sky, the colors less saturated, the tall saguaro stems an eerie green. Once I, too, had looked west at sunset, east at sunrise. Now I stand in a place where the view of the sky is broad, the horizon visible, and look in both directions, whether from across a sea or lake or open plain, from hill or rooftop, to observe sunrise/sunset and earth’s shadow. To perceive the earth as a whirling sphere, I watch its shadow move. Sometimes, in the evening when the shadow swells from thin dark line to broad arch, I feel the earth turning.

Stories of being and becoming are embodied in the world, waiting to be read. Some, like earth’s shadow, are cosmic, others are mundane. I search for both, and for the processes that drive the narratives, to discover the patterns that underlie them. I look for places where process creates a pattern that transcends scale, where I can appreciate how similar processes shape the local landscape, the earth, and the universe, like a “galaxy” of sea foam. ²⁴ Where human settlement and the landscape’s own deep structure correspond (The Ridgeway ³¹, High Plains ³²). Where people have shaped and arranged landscape to express identity and idea (Kongenshus ²⁸). Where cultures have acknowledged the power of place (Uluru ¹¹). To learn to read the stories in landscape, I looked first for places easily read: seashores, deserts, and mountains; the sacred landscapes of memorials, cemeteries, places of worship; political landscapes, as in Washington, DC. Such landscape primers prepared me for more complex readings, as in the Scottish Highlands, the Salton Sea, the Black Bottom of West Philadelphia — all of which hold dark, overlapping stories of natural and human history. ²⁷ Some places have unusual power to stir human emotions and inspire stories; I seek these out to understand the source of their power and to learn how a similar power might be found or instilled by design in more ordinary places. I search for places that reflect phenomena too vast or

abstract to experience directly: the collision of continental plates or global warming. I am looking for the extraordinary in the ordinary. The earth shadow I once thought peculiar to Uluru turned out to be recurrent, there for all who have the eyes to see. I had looked but had not seen. My camera recorded a spectacle, but my mind missed the wonder. Years later, my photographs reconstructed the experience so I could perceive pattern, and then seek and find the same phenomenon elsewhere.

Photography is a medium of thought; it is a means of discovery and expression, a way to decipher patterns, to work out ideas, to find and tell stories. Through photography, I want to inspire others to look deeply at the surface of things and beyond to the stories landscapes tell, the processes that shape human lives and communities, the earth itself, and the universe. To pick up a camera and use it to see, think, and discover.