The Ukrainian Sacred Landscape: A Metaphor of Survival and Acculturation

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Résumé

Des données recueillies au Manitoba et ailleurs dans les Prairies démontrent que le paysage sacré des Ukrainiens, composé d’églises et de stèles funéraires, est une métaphore du changement culturel et un indice de la nature et de la rapidité de l’acculturation.

Abstract

Data from Manitoba and elsewhere on the Prairies show that the Ukrainian sacred landscape, composed of churches and cemetery markers, constitutes a metaphor for cultural change and an index to the nature and rate of acculturation.

Literally nothing on earth is secure from man’s incorrigibly metaphorizing disposition, propensity to invest every feature of his environment with both a meaning and a morality.

—Gilbert Adair

Landscapes of the Canadian West derive their diversity from cultural impress rather than topographic variation. Each group of settlers entering the agricultural lands of western Canada hauled with them an immense cultural baggage of ideas, values, attitudes and expectations, which were quickly manifested in the built environment whenever home­steads were cut into the prairie sod or hacked out of the northern margins of the bush country.

One of the most distinctive landscapes to emerge in the West was that created by Ukrainian immigrants from the Austrian provinces of Galicia and Bukovyna. Between 1892 and 1914, these settlers pioneered large tracts of land in the northern parklands and along the southern fringes of the boreal forest. The appearance of their settlements soon attracted attention and drew comment from curious Anglo-Canadians, who saw their landscapes as alien, exotic, even a little romantic. The accounts of these frontier observers were generally descriptive, but often superficial and inaccurate, and focused only on the most obvious elements of the cultural milieu.

Only in the last twenty years have scholars from a variety of disciplines analysed the Ukrainian rural landscape in Canada. Most such studies have been detailed examinations of one component of the cultural landscape—most commonly, the folk house or farmstead, less commonly, the church. The wider landscape has not yet been interpreted in a holistic fashion. It may be premature to attempt a holistic examination at this stage of understanding, and the scope of such a task is well beyond the bounds of this paper, which attempts to offer an approach toward the interpretation of the cultural landscape. This approach uses the Ukrainian sacred landscape as a metaphor for assimilation, change and acculturation within Ukrainian communities in the Canadian West.

Cultural Transfer and Pioneer Settlement

It is always tempting to predicate studies of the development of immigrant cultures in the New World on the assumption that immigrants left a fixed, long-established cultural tradition in the Old World to enter the cultural maelstrom of the New World. Hence, cultural change is seen as a phenomenon engendered by the shift of locales. Like most simple and convenient assumptions, it is false. Western Ukraine of the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a society in transition. By the 1880s even remote areas of western Ukraine had been drawn into the orbit of the industrialized world. Railways tied the principal market centres to the outside world; ideas and mass-produced goods percolated into the
most isolated of villages, which in turn fed the industrial heartland with agricultural goods. Village life was changing, as the outflow of dissatisfied emigrants testified. The rural landscape of western Ukraine was not the same as it had been a hundred years previously: church styles were evolving, as were the farms and houses of the peasantry.

For those who left and came to settle on the agricultural frontier of western Canada, the pace of change certainly accelerated. New pressures pushed from different directions: old pressures exerted by the German, Russian and Polish cultures were replaced by the more intensive and pervasive pressure of Anglo-Canadian—or Anglo-American—culture. In some respects, the act of emigration and shift of locales led to economically engendered cultural retrenchment, as when Ukrainian settlers reverted to simple dug-out dwellings used by the Carpathian highland shepherds or when they used the chimneyless “black house” (chôma khata) in the first years of settlement.

For the most part, immigrants re-created a domestic landscape patterned on that of their homeland simply because it did not occur to them to do otherwise. They built in the way to which they were accustomed; it was a practical response to creating a new milieu. Space was organized to fit established patterns of use; hence, house form, barn design and farm layout remained in the traditional form.

Pioneers adapted easily to the incorporation of new materials, making any necessary modifications to design and form—they did not see the domestic landscape as imbued with the deeper meanings of ethnic identity. Aesthetic values were expressed in building forms and decoration, but were generally subservient to the more immediate concerns of securing economic well-being. To the Ukrainian pioneer forging a new life in the West, a house was merely shelter. If it had meaning, it was not as a symbol of ethnic affiliation so much as a statement of economic status. Status was measured by the degree of integration achieved with the Anglo-Canadian economic system. Houses built on traditional patterns fell prey to attempts to slough off vestiges of poverty, and the desire to be seen as “modern” and, of course, as a progressive and economically successful farmer. These attitudes resulted in the rapid disappearance of traditional-style houses, barns and farm layouts from the more prosperous Ukrainian agricultural districts. In the marginal agricultural areas change was present, but slower.

In contrast to the fading Ukrainian presence in the domestic landscape, the sacred landscapes of Ukrainian settlement remain strongly entrenched in the landscape. Churches, bell towers, memorial crosses and gravestones constitute a highly visible element of the ethnic landscape. Furthermore, because of its symbolic significance, the sacred landscape, superficially at least, has the appearance of being an unchanging landscape, one which will long outlast its more ephemeral domestic counterpart.

The most obvious difference in these two landscapes lies in function. The sacred landscape was, and is, an expression of religious affiliation. It is shaped by the expression of spiritual beliefs, accommodation of the liturgy and the demands of ritual. For the Ukrainians in western Canada, there was a fourth and vital function: national identity.

After the decline of Kievan Rus’ in the fourteenth century, the Ukrainians fell under a variety of foreign administrations: Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, Romanian and Austrian. Ukraine then existed only as a geographical concept. Its people were fragmented and lacked any clear national identity. In western Ukraine, the region which provided virtually all Ukrainian immigrants to Canada in the agricultural pioneer era, the population was under Austrian control. In Galicia, the Austrian government left much administration in the hands of the Poles who had formerly controlled the region. Similarly, in Bukovyna, Romanian influence continued to prevail.

Under Polish influence, an attempt was made to Catholicize the Orthodox Ukrainian population of Galicia. As a first step, a new church—the Greek Catholic or Uniate church—was established, retaining the Slavonic liturgy and the tradition of a married priesthood, but acknowledging the Pope as its spiritual head. It did not fulfill its intended aim of easing the transition to Roman Catholicism. Instead, in Galicia, it became a symbol of Ukrainian ethnic identity, adopting the role maintained by the Greek (or Russian) Orthodox church in Bukovyna. Hence, to the Ukrainian peasant, whether Uniate or Orthodox, the church was a powerful symbol. Apart from its spiritual meaning, the church came to represent ethnic identity; religion was given by social inheritance and became associated with a cluster of culture. To the Ukrainians of Galicia and Bukovyna, the church (Uniate and Orthodox churches respectively) was the bearer of national identity.
aspiration as well as the guardian of the culture and identity of a people. Thus, the church had both a spiritual and a secular role. Its form symbolized the elements of Christian belief, but also signalled the presence and distinction of the congregation it served. It was an icon of identity in the Ukrainian landscape, its design transcending its religious significance.

The Church in the New World
Within a few years of settlement in Canada, Ukrainian communities were sufficiently established and cohesive to contemplate building a church. The structure of Ukrainian rural settlement in the West, where emigrants from particular villages or districts settled together, meant that congregations in the New World often had the same level of homogeneity as in the old country, thus facilitating the transference of architectural stylistic norms into the pioneer environment.

The first church of any pioneer community was likely to be modest in size and decor, reflecting the economy of the agricultural frontier and the limited skills at the community’s disposal. Most pioneer church builders were, at best, skilled in carpentry; it is doubtful if any had architectural training; hence, they built from memory, replicating the church of their former village. Difficult architectural constructions such as the Byzantine dome (banya) were often omitted from early pioneer churches, giving them an appearance more reminiscent of the traditional church designs before baroque elements became widely adopted in western Ukraine. Many of these early pioneer churches and bell towers, built of log like their old country counterparts, were a direct extension of the centuries-old folk traditions of building in wood.

In Manitoba, two of these early pioneer era churches still survive: St. Michael’s Ukrainian Orthodox Church at Gardenton and, some twelve miles (19 km) east, St. Elias Ukrainian Orthodox Church at Sirko. These two buildings exemplify the evolution of pioneer church design: both are log structures built by immigrants from Bukovyna; both were built within a few years of the settlement of their respective areas, St. Michael’s in 1899 and St. Elias in 1909; and both have been replaced by more modern buildings that have incorporated similar design elements.

St. Michael’s was the first Greek Orthodox church built in Canada. Built between 1897 and 1899 by immigrants, mostly from Omit, Bukovyna, it was of the plan most popular in western Ukraine: three frames oriented on an east–west axis with the central frame slightly larger than the adjacent two, jutting out to provide a cruciform plan. Originally the building had a straw-thatched, low-pitched gable roof and lacked the distinctive banyas that are often the hallmark of Ukrainian religious architecture. In 1915 the initial roof...
was replaced and a dome structure was incorporated into the building. Menholy [Manoly] Khalaturnyk, a carpenter and builder, rebuilt the roof according to examples recalled from his native Bukovyna. He incorporated a central dome resting on an octagonal base and added two small cupolas at the ridge of the hipped roofs over the outer frames. This addition reflected the rising national consciousness of the Ukrainian settlers in the Gardenton area, many of whom had only recently begun to favour the designation “Ukrainian” rather than the imprecise “Austrian” or the more parochial “Galician” or “Bukovynian” to describe their ethnicity/nationality. Emigration and settlement had strengthened national consciousness by exposure to a thriving Ukrainian language press and more frequent contact with Ukrainians from other parts of Ukraine. Hence, it was not surprising that Khalaturnyk selected a roof style common to religious architecture in Ukraine and emblematic of the Ukrainian presence.

Some years earlier, in 1909, Khalaturnyk had built St. Elias Greek Orthodox Church at Sirko. This log church and bell tower followed the traditional Carpathian-Ukrainian design. Without the distinctive banyas, St. Elias resembled the traditional peasant house of Bukovyna in its profile, form, construction and, particularly, its distinctive, heavy overhanging roof. In a great many respects, these two early pioneer churches and others like them represented a simple transfer of culture without great change effected by the process.

Pioneer communities were always exposed to the influences of Anglo-Canadian culture. Although the form of the church was relatively resistant to change through incorporation of alien design features, change was effected quite rapidly in the method of construction. Log, the commonly used material in the pioneer era, gave way to sawn lumber. Wood-frame churches made their appearance in the early 1900s; most were fairly simple, although some were sophisticated structures with internally expressed domes, multi-frame plans, transepts and animated roof lines. There is no uniform chronology of evolution, for all depended upon the economic progress of the parish. Depressed economic circumstances confined some parishes to modest expressions in the new churches if, indeed, the old pioneer church was replaced at all. For others, more fortunately placed, agricultural prosperity permitted construction of larger, more ornate, wood-frame churches. In some instances, carpenter/builders attempted to replicate the ornate and sophisticated stone churches of their homeland, with remarkable success. The products of this cultural transference were not products of a vernacular tradition but, as Diana Thomas Kordan notes, “comprise a genuine stylistic class worthy of study and discussion on its own merits.”

These churches reflected the traditions and tastes of church architecture as experienced by their builders before they emigrated from western Ukraine. Regional styles were incorporated into the churches built in Canada, as were design elements then being adopted in the homeland. But the carpenters/builders, constructing wood-frame churches, were influenced by New World conditions in many ways. Exposure to other traditions of ecclesiastical architecture undoubtedly changed their approach toward
design. Even if a builder was intent upon replicating a homeland design, the increasing availability of stock materials from building suppliers in urban centres influenced building form and design. Stock sizes of lumber, plywood, door frames, hinges and so forth removed much of the individual spontaneity associated with the early log churches.

It is in these wood-frame churches that the Gothic-arch church window begins to appear. Alien to Ukrainian and Byzantine traditions, it was incorporated into Ukrainian prairie churches simply because these church windows were easily available through any builder's catalogue. Acceptance was eased by the popular association of the Gothic arch with the religious buildings of western Europe and North America. Whether this was an economically or culturally fuelled intrusion is hard to determine; perhaps it showed elements of both. What is certain is that it reflected the cultural changes taking place within the Ukrainian rural communities during the same period.

A more dramatic modification of the usual designs associated with wood-frame churches was the incorporation of twin tall narrow towers on either side of the entryway. These towers were generally capped with small banyas. Thomas Kordan states that the “twin tower motif at the west end of the church is unquestionably linked to the influence of western European Baroque architecture in Ukraine during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.” This design is rare in Ukraine—builders of wooden churches in Ukraine did not attach tall narrow towers to the fronts of their structures—yet, it is a common motif found on wood-frame Ukrainian churches across the Prairies. Thomas Kordan argues that the influence of indigenous French-Canadian church design upon Ukrainian builders was responsible for the adoption of this motif into their churches. French Catholic influence penetrated into Ukrainian communities via the Uniate (Greek Catholic) church and Catholic missionary orders such as the Basilians and the Oblates.[21] In Komarno and Gimli, Manitoba, Ukrainian Catholic churches in this style were built for local congregations by a Belgian contractor, who presumably used Belgian or French models as a basis for the design, adding the Ukrainian banyas and other decorative elements to lend a “Ukrainian” appearance to the building. The significance is not that this Gothic element was introduced into the Ukrainian design, but that it was accepted by the clergy and the congregation. It is argued here that such an acceptance of an alien architectural element would only be possible within a community which was already partly acculturated. Like the church building, the community was no longer purely Ukrainian; in its material and non-material culture, it was firmly Ukrainian-Canadian.

The churches designed and built by Father Philip Ruh of the Oblate missionary order well illustrate the process of change within the Ukrainian communities of the West. Ruh, born in Alsace, joined the Oblate Fathers (the Catholic missionary order) and received training in Germany, where he studied theology, economics, botany, art, astronomy and architecture. After his ordination in 1910, Ruh was briefly assigned to Ukraine, where he learned to read and speak Ukrainian, before he was posted to Alberta. Although not a trained architect, Ruh built at least thirty churches across the Prairies and as far east as St. Catharines, Ontario.[22]

In his churches Ruh demonstrated a genuine interest in and respect for the architectural traditions of Ukraine as well as a powerful architectural imagination. He accommodated Roman Catholic influences into his designs yet consciously strove to retain the “Ukrainian” appearance of his churches. In so doing he produced some spectacular designs, often monumental in scale, which, like the communities they served, were as much a product of the New World as they were of the Old. Superficially, they are fully Ukrainian in appearance, but closer examination reveals absorption of many non-Ukrainian traditions. The incorporation of alien practices paralleled the incorporation of alien motifs. In Ruh’s churches, as in many of the churches built after the passing of the pioneer era, chairs or even pews were installed as parishioners abandoned the traditional practice of worshipping kneeling or standing, segregated by sex on either side of the central aisle. Along with the concession to comfort came a recognition of diminishing language facility, the introduction of bilingual services and the increasing use of English within the liturgy. Equally importantly, non-Ukrainian architectural elements had become so common both in church architecture and everyday life that they were becoming regarded as a part of the Ukrainian tradition by the people themselves.

In the post-war era a number of Ukrainian-born Canadian architects have attempted to retain the Ukrainian essence in their designs
for new churches. For some, such as Radoslav Zuk, the approach has been to capture the traditional elements in an abstract way while using modern technologies and building methods. Others, like Victor Deneka, have taken a more cautious approach, blending the aesthetics of the Ukrainian tradition with modern construction methodologies but eschewing the simplistic imposition of stylized emblems of the Ukrainian presence upon otherwise undistinguished buildings. Regardless of the approach, innovative design of modern Ukrainian churches is invariably controversial, possibly because the degree of assimilation of the Ukrainian community into the mainstream of Anglo-Canadian culture is so great that many cling to the need to maintain an easily recognizable emblem in the landscape. Ironically, for the assimilated, ethnic kitsch may be more recognizable and more comforting than innovative design founded squarely on traditions inspired by the body of architecture closely identified with Ukraine. This reliance on superficial symbols has led to the fostering of mediocrity; obvious symbolism in much of Ukrainian church design parodies Ukrainian architecture. Sadly, this architectural mediocrity reflects the absence of cultural substance that pervades all aspects of everyday life.

If the form and design of the Ukrainian church serve as a metaphor for cultural change, as is argued here, they function most effectively in the context of the wider religious landscape. Each church reflects the progress of change or the degree of assimilation present in the community at the time of church construction. Taken together, the range of church buildings constitutes an effective record within a region; individually, each church alone seldom offers a record of the process of cultural change.

There are exceptions, of course. On occasion, original buildings, when replaced, were not removed and so continue to stand alongside the new church, as at Sirko, Manitoba, where the pioneer church of 1909 stands adjacent to its 1950 replacement. One is traditional, practical and aesthetically simple; the other, emblematic, self-conscious and culturally hybrid: both offer a commentary upon the nature of the society that built them.

For the most part, the churchyard and cemetery offer the most complete record of the process of acculturation. As landscape features, cemeteries are assemblages of personal memorials; often, the collective quality of memorialization stands out. Grave markers point to a common past rather than to the specific persons whose names appear on them. Indeed, as Lowenthal further remarks, cemeteries matter less as repositories for the dead than as fields of remembrance for the living. The landscape of commemoration becomes the landscape of the past, commemorating not individuals, but the society of which they were a part.

Ukrainian cemeteries in rural areas provide a good record of socio-economic change—a record, moreover, for which chronology is inscribed with some precision, as most grave markers carry the date of birth and death as well as the name and other personal details of
those commemorated. The transition from frontier immigrant society to the mainstream of Canadian life is recorded in the style and nature of memorial crosses and grave markers and in the inscriptions they carry.

The first grave markers were usually simple wooden crosses, bearing the name of the deceased and, perhaps, a date of death, carved into the wood in Cyrillic characters. Today, most of these early markers have disappeared; when they survive, any inscription is indecipherable on wood exposed to weathering for several decades. In the 1920s and 1930s, earlier in some areas, many Ukrainian communities adopted a new technology to manufacture more durable tombstones and memorials. Concrete poured into forms to create a Catholic or Orthodox cross made a more enduring marker. Inscriptions were drawn into the concrete before it set, and later, after the “stone” was painted white, the lettering was picked out in black. Many of the early wooden crosses were replaced by this type of marker, the inscription faithfully transcribed from wood to stone.

Most of these concrete crosses were manufactured locally by one local contractor who offered a limited choice of design. Thus, cemeteries within various localities came to have a certain uniformity of headstone design until professionally cut granite tombstones began to be imported from the larger urban centres. These new granite stones often bear no indication of religious affiliation in their style; most are of the upright flat slab variety, though a few—and presumably the more expensive—have been cut into the shape of the Orthodox Cross of St. Andrew.

If the material and form of the grave marker parallel the economic development of the community in the use of material—first the use of local wood, next the use of imported materials by local craftsmen to manufacture a local product, and finally the import of a product professionally made outside the community—the inscriptions borne upon each further emphasize the degree of change within the community. Early graves bear inscriptions in Cyrillic. Regional dialect forms, even misspellings, may be found and the incursion of various influences traced. For example, in southeastern Manitoba, the use of say rather than tse (this) as late as 1924 indicates the survival of strong Bukovynian regional...
The decline of language retention is clearly becoming used on gravestones, with the Ukrainianized term rather than the correct Ukrainian Apriliya, rather than the correct Ukrainian kviten', for April, or Maya, rather than raven', for May. After 1945 English becomes used on gravestones, with the Ukrainianized Vichnaya Pamyat' in Latin characters. The decline of language retention is clearly catalogued and dated. Even subtle shifts in ethnic consciousness are recorded. The resurgence of ethnic pride, or awareness of heritage, is best seen in the appearance of bilingual gravestones in the late 1970s. For some this is a mixture of English and Ukrainian in the inscription, but for others a gravestone with a Cyrillic inscription on one face and English on the other indicates a recognition of the bicultural nature of Ukrainian-Canadian society in the 1980s.

This paper has argued that the Ukrainian sacred landscape can function as a metaphor for cultural change in the wider Ukrainian community. This is not to say that it is perceived as such by the community in question, or even by mainstream society in western Canada. Unlike most metaphors, it is not static, but is evolving continuously, reflecting not only the time but the nature and the rate of acculturation of Ukrainians. Therein, perhaps, lies its unique status.

NOTES


3. An initial attempt was made in John C. Lehr, "The Landscape of Ukrainian Settlement in the Canadian West," Great Plains Quarterly 2, no. 2 (Spring, 1982): 94-105.


5. Before 1914, over 120,000 Ukrainians immigrated into Canada. Probably as many again immigrated to the United States and Brazil.


8. Lehr, "Landscape of Ukrainian Settlement," 102; and Hohol', Grekul House, 46-65.


13. Curniski has noted that the banya has become an emblem of ethnicity and that Ukrainian communities appear to be reluctant to build any church without a banya. See Curniski, "Icons and Banyas," 2. On homeland styles in church architecture see George Korbyn, Ukrainian Style in Church Architecture (Arcadia, Calif.: By the author, 1983); Paul R. Magocsi and Florian Zapletal, Wooden Churches in the Carpathians (Vienna: W. Braumüller, 1982).


15. The term “Ukrainian” did not enter into popular use until after 1917. It was not employed as a national designation by the Census of Canada until 1931.


17. Ibid., 18.


27. Ibid.
