

Reading Texts About Places and Environments

In one way or another, places compose our lives. They are rich **subjects** to explore and write about. Yet it may be hard to imagine that the places *you* inhabit deserve serious scrutiny. Who cares about your home town or the music club where your band played its first gig? Doesn't it require really talented writers or photographers to make an **audience** appreciate special places? Sometimes it does. But almost anyone can learn to respond powerfully to the neighborhoods of the world. All it takes is identifying the details that make a place special.

It's easy, for example, to find cultural meanings and patterns in spectacular scenes or landscapes—Las Vegas's bizarre skyline clearly says something about American values (see Item 4.3), while gut-wrenching images from Hurricane Katrina tell an entirely different story (see Item 4.4). Yet the very skills that enable you to find meaning in conspicuous situations like these can help you detect patterns in less obvious locales. When you encounter a place, real or recreated, first ask, "Where am I?" and "What sort of place is this?" Then consider how you can give **purpose** and **structure** to your response to that environment.

In a *natural environment*, for instance, pay attention first to its features—terrain, climate, geological formations, and animal and plant life. Then consider how human marks or intrusions shape your own experience of nature (see Item 4.5). Put the place you are viewing or reading about into a physical or cultural **context** that helps to make sense of it, explaining, for example, how a desert shapes the structure of its native plants or why a wetland should be preserved.

In contrast to natural environments, *built environments* are those made, in whole or in part, by people. Whether these spaces have been casually assembled or formally designed, such human spaces serve functions you can describe and contemplate. One could just as easily learn from the relationships in a crowded diaper changing room (see Item 4.6) as from a soaring skyscraper (see Item 4.7) or virtual landscape such as Second Life. And, of course, writers, poets, and artists do exactly that, helping us to glimpse the layers of cultural experience embedded in built environments, from suburban homes to celebrated highways (see, for example, Item 4.8). Like these artists, you need to study the elements of an intriguing place, the people it attracts, the activities and events that occur there. Look for relationships and stories (see Item 4.9). All places have them.

Look, too, for the boundaries we put on places, if only to make them more manageable or give them **structure** in our minds. Some frontiers will seem natural—the rivers or mountains that mark regional or national borders. Other boundaries, you'll discover, are fashioned by people. An interstate highway, for instance, may be a *de facto* wall, sorting a town by race and class; ethnic groups may coalesce around schools, churches, and specialty stores (see Item 4.10). A writer or artist might discover such important cultural markers—or the task may fall to you.

To introduce audiences to environments you attach importance to, you must choose a **medium**. Writers typically compose essays, journals, or even travelogues; other artists may create paintings, photographs, Web sites, or videos. How a place is experienced—whether via the pages of a book or through the Plexiglas of a tour bus—makes a difference. Keep your options open.

Gallery: Places and Environments



ITEM 4.3 ■ Paris Casino, The Strip, Las Vegas

In the middle of the Nevada desert, the Las Vegas strip is a place that seems to represent an alternative reality. Here you see landmarks from Paris; elsewhere you might find a sphinx and pyramid, a pirate ship, a volcano, or Roman colonnades—as well as plenty of slot machines.

- 1 What does the photograph suggest about life and culture in Las Vegas? Why, for example, recreate the distinctive sights of Paris or ancient Rome in an American city? Does Las Vegas have a character of its own?
- 2 What sites or buildings in your current location would you photograph if you were trying to explain the place to viewers not familiar with it? Why?