

errata:  
N-1 #15 never written

May 1, 1986 (letter 16)

Dear Colleague:

Ron Cooke's Trewartha lecture on geomorphology and on the weathering of buildings led me to a line of thought that has a certain historical as well as psychological interest. Until the nineteenth century, landforms were perceived almost exclusively as constructive features: they have been built up by the internal forces of the earth; hills swell out of the ground--they are a kind of growth--and valleys are slivers of the earth's crust that have dropped, like the faulty keystones of arches. The modern science of geomorphology, as it developed in the late nineteenth century, took the opposite point of view: it saw, by and large correctly, that landforms are ruins, features carved out by the forces of erosion and weathering. Now, what about artifactitious landforms, by which I mean buildings and cities? Well, these features of the earth have clearly been built--no doubt about that; nevertheless, the day they rise above the earth's surface they too are subject to weathering and erosion. Buildings, including Science Hall, may not be ruins but they are on their way to becoming ruins. They still stand thanks to the heroic efforts of maintenance, thanks to human beings trying mightily to stay entropy. Working as I do in Science Hall, I am deeply conscious of this continual struggle. I am beginning to believe that carpenters, plumbers, and other workmen are as permanently installed in Science Hall as are the faculty. The point of psychological interest is that we are most reluctant to acknowledge decay. We used to see the hills as "built" and eternal when they are not, and we now tend to see the city as a permanent accomplishment--something that can grow as new features are added but will not really fall apart. At least, that how I think because when I see Park Street or University Avenue being repaired I suffer the illusion that it must be for the last time--that once a street or a building is finally repaired it will stay sound forever.

But how can an academic think this way? Aren't we supposed to believe that all structures are provisional, that they ought to be exposed to withering (weathering?) criticism, that we should be prepared to abandon the structures we have built for new ones any time? I have the feeling, however, that I in my office am doing much the same thing as the carpenter is doing in the corridor just outside my office. We are both trying to shore up ruins! As he caulks a seam there I plug a hole in my argument here. We both try to keep our respective structures standing for as long as possible before the contract or tenure runs out.

A kind reader (G L-M) notes that the word "emergency" (see letter 12) has taken on a negative tone some time in the 17th century when it no longer means simply "something that emerges" but something that emerges unexpectedly and hence is a cause for alarm: e.g., Donne (1631): "The Psalms minister instruction...to every man, in every emergency."

Best wishes,

*Zi-Zu*