

For Thanksgiving, I was in Montreal for a family event, which was a little funny, since [Canadian Thanksgiving](#) went by about six weeks ago. But it did give me an opportunity to see a strange tick in one part of America's self-conception.



Independence Hall in the Passport

Take a look at your US passport. In the section for visas, you will find the standard collection of great sayings, as well as a standard collection of idyllic American scenes. Notice something missing?

There isn't a single picture of anything that could be regarded as urban. The closest is a print of what appears to be Philadelphia's Independence Hall, but done in such a way that the City of Brotherly Love morphs into [Smallville's](#) town square. Ditto with the Statue of Liberty page: you could have had a spectacular shot of Lady Liberty against the New York skyline; in the passport, she is all by herself. All the other pictures are scenes of wilderness, rural farms, cowboys ranching, even the moon — *anything* but a city.

The normal turn here would be to say something about how Americans hate cities, but I think that is quite wrong. Americans surely flock to something they hate: since 1920, more Americans have lived in cities than rural areas. (Now, IIRC more are suburban than urban, but both are far greater than rural. Given the GOP's desire to bankrupt the government, we can look forward to "US Passport Brought to You by Wal-Mart", with plenty of strip mall shots, but that's in the future.).



....and what it REALLY looks like.

Instead, it seems to me that at least some folks in the State Department *think* that Americans don't like cities, and are appealing to a hopelessly obsolete Jeffersonian view. Consider the quote they chose from Ike: "Whatever America hopes to bring to pass in the world must first come to pass in the heart of America". The picture is of a farmer plowing his field *with two oxen* — hardly a good reflection of today's United States. But more to the point: why is that the heart of America? Sure, Ike was from Kansas, but he got out at age 18 and never moved back. California has tens of millions of more people than the supposed "heartland": what makes farms the heartland?

This isn't just about what Richard Hofstadter termed the "agrarian myth" of America: it also has some bad environmental consequences. As writers across the political spectrum — from Ed Glaeser on the right to New Urbanists on the left to [David Owen](#) in the curmudgeonly corner — have pointed out, cities are the most environmentally friendly places to live. And that's not even considering the billions of dollars in agricultural subsidies that damage the environment.

So the next time the State Department redesigns the passport, keep the Statue of Liberty, but show the skyline behind it.