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Caring About Places: Recognition

It is not after all surprising that one of the demands that we make of places is that we be able to recognize them. We are expected to recognize people we care about, to pay enough attention to their characteristics so that we may distinguish them, name them, even bring their features to mind. As a corollary, people make some effort to be distinguishable, some desperately, some with an admirable sense of wit. A few people, by twist of fate or by strength of will need make no effort, their presence simply is distinctive.

So it is with places. Some places, natural ones mostly, are obviously distinct; no wishing is involved. Those that are most well known usually involve titanic forces (Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon come easily to mind). Built places of real distinction require effort; an effort in the making and a corresponding effort of recognition. They respond to our queries because they embody careful, particular thoughts. They may bear the traces of many imaginings, the scars of conflicting territorial claims, the quirks of an obsessed attention, but

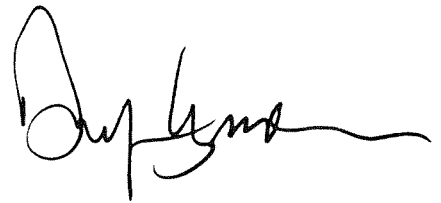
they have always a conjunction of shapes that is unique to the place.

Of course, all places, like all people, do differ. It's when we fail to attend to them, or when their particular qualities have been submerged within the abstractions of production that they become anonymous and we become weary, as at a party with too many guests. Even then, places become distinct when they become familiar, when we have matched them to the events of our daily lives, gradually discerned the features of their configurations and watched the light move across their surfaces in various hours and seasons. They become familiar by being renewed, reappearing with some constancy in our midst. We know where we are because we've been there before. How much we may know about where we are has to do with what we bring to the place and with how much it has been formed to pique our curiosity, to provoke recollections and to make itself available to inquiry.

Places reflect aspects of ourselves as novels do, but places are not paginated. We must seek the stories

in them, piecing together the evidence of our senses and joining in the action.

Places, like people, have histories. As a result some are secretive, some bold, some impossibly at odds with themselves. To know places well is difficult. It requires tolerance, imaginative effort and a resistance to the hucksters' images. Only through sustained attention do we see glimpses of community, of what we might have done or might yet do if we are not irreparably singular. These are reasons enough to need places that encourage recognition: that invite us to think about them again—and with passion.



Donlyn Lyndon