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Radiant Lessons from the Failed Landscape of Desire

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I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid
plain behind me

T. S. Eliot
"The Waste Land"

These thoughts were occasioned by participation in a symposium on phenomenology and the environment.¹ Some time later, I realized that metaphysical issues were at stake, and not mere matters of design, functional niceties, and efficiency. We were *concretely* involved in creating a theory of reality for the contemporary person. What is more, the vision of the real that dimly emerged had ancient roots and our discussion was, in effect, a retrieval of a long forgotten tradition.

The tradition of which I speak has been obscured by the positivism and scientism of the present age and arrogantly cast onto the metaphysical junk pile. Among the adherents of this tradition are the greatest thinkers in the history of Western philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, and Hegel. Its essential principle may be stated thus:

The whole is more than the sum of its parts. This simple thought, elegant in its simplicity, is a fecund ground for discourse about relationships between the person, society, and the environment. It tells us that wholes and parts and their interrelations constitute the central core of reality. Also it brings to the fore the question of identity and difference and the issue of time as passage and time as completion. In short, the grand themes of metaphysics are not universal abstrac-

tions, but rather gain concrete expression whenever questions of environmental life and quality are seriously raised.

To illustrate this, let me review succinctly the major themes of the conference to draw out the underlying metaphysical principles.

The symposium began with a discussion of the open spaces which establish boundaries around homes. Through a phenomenology of yards, it was established that movement is an essential ingredient in these areas of openness. Furthermore, such movement is made intelligible by three phases of human environmental interaction. First, every open space has to have a definitive threshold whereby one can sense, albeit dimly, the passage from one zone of the open to another. This discrimination is brought about by the body sensing the *difference* in various areas about the home (for example, the hedge that borders the front door that opens and the back door that leads out.) Second, what makes this sense of difference concrete is the *identity* granted each region by the bounded quality of its spatial zone. Thus, to be a this and not a that is of essential importance in establishing an intelligible flow of movement throughout a home and its surrounding spaces. Sheer, homogeneous space results in undifferentiated sameness. Third, the defining power of borders

allows the participant to enter by action or by vision modes of living space that demand appropriate responses.

All this tells us that when borders fail, dwelling is endangered. A complex ensemble of different spaces is required to anchor the identity of the human in the real world. This means that the act of dwelling in a human way always entails an extended unity of personal body, house, and yard. In fact, without such distinct regions, the emergence of community becomes impossible. For without the edging of the private into the public (as occurs when neighbors gossip over backyard fences) the maintenance of the tension between autonomy and shared values is impossible. Free speech requires backyards.

The metaphysical dimensions of this phenomenology of yards require further elaboration. The relation between framing and definitions is being pointed out. To be a real particular this is to be different from a real particular that. Thus identity is achieved through difference, not in spite of it.² The acknowledgment of the other is essential for the creation of the individual. The framing brought about by the centripetal zones of domestic outdoor space allows identity to be grasped through the admission of the other into the region

of place. Also this place of human dwelling is a meaningful whole by reason of the relations of its parts. Action, understood as movement with intent, flows through these separate spaces and binds them into a unity that is more than the sum of its parts. Whenever a human being truly dwells, he sets up a region of meaning that is charged with different levels of sensibility. A healthy environment allows the person to move through different spaces, sense their qualitative differences, and grasp a unifying pattern. Without such patterns, the human being sickens and dies.

We see, then, that identity through difference is the first outcome of the principle that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Nothing reveals this metaphysical principle more concretely than the way in which the yard brings together into a unity the difference between built space and natural space—the coincidence of these opposites gives birth to the meaning of human place.

To be human involves *being-in-place*, for place is the region within which a clearing for meaning is marked out. This understanding of the rock-bottom importance of meaning for human dwelling is forgotten by all those schools of “rational” architecture that, under the guise of modernism, have evolved in corporate America. Order, neutral

space, and so-called clean lines are anathema to the authentic metaphysical mind. We need the sharp contrast that comes from distinct difference: The human person as dweller will cultivate the whole that is inchoate in different parts.

“Being” and “logos” have a quaint sound to the modern ear; at best, they strike us as learned and arcane. But from the perspective so far developed, they take on new force. Being is not an empty word but the meaning granted by a place. *Logos* is not meaningless Greek but the very way in which a place shows forth its meaning.

Thus, place gathers being through its *logos*, and the human body grasps this *logos* through its own felt understanding of place. But for our somatic intelligence to begin to work, an initial contrast must be imposed upon its functionings. This inauguration of place is made possible through the identity of difference—the shock of contrast that is felt with intensity. Meaning emerges by contrast and so place is the ground of identity won through affirmed difference. We can only affirm what we sense to be different. Effective architecture engraves difference on our consciousness and, at the same time, permits the dweller to create identity through such difference. It compels us to assemble a sense of place.

The sterility of behavioral analysis of lived space—its

unending insistence on the flat dimension of stimulus and response—results from this neglect of the realm of meaning. To be human is to clear a place for meaning in our lives.

The symposium continued with a presentation of the teaching of architectural design. Students were required to interact with their clients, to discuss the lived meaning of the environment as they experienced it. Patient watching and analysis in the context of the project replace the withdrawal of the architect into his private studio.

The rationale for this insistence on intimate, painstaking analysis of the site is the understanding of architecture as the expression of symbolic intention through material form. The qualitative, felt, and meaningful totality of human perception is stressed rather than its quantity. The notion of design as problem-solving with an emphasis on functional technology is emphatically rejected. Instead, design was seen as evocative and revelatory of what is already there, the established matrix of meaning that constitutes the lived pattern of the neighborhood. Old buildings, bearing the weight of neighborhood history, worn with the tread of many generations, could very well be the hub of a neighborhood’s social well-being. Replacing these

buildings with shiny new design modules creates discontinuity and a sense of dislocation, for the vernacular architecture of a place often carries with it an irreplaceable sense of the past.

The spiritual arises from the physical. This axiom demands that all design be grounded in the spirit of a place and its invocation. In terms of our basic metaphysical principle, we can say that totality arises from the particularity of place. The whole, in other words, is felt through its parts, for the universal is enshrined in the finite and mirrors itself in all particulars. Real places for real human beings are interactive, not passive. Once again, the theme of *logos* arises: Phenomenological design lets be the being of a place in all its fullness.

Education in terms of design requires an effort to let the body (not the rational mind) of the planner remember its place. The body has its own *logos*: A prereflective affinity with the world. This means that the flesh has its own mind,³ a way of knowing that the incarnate person experiences in his living through an environment. Planners tend to forget this dimension of human experience. In attempting to remember this fact, the design student ought to be caught up in the web of interrelations that constitute the reality of any concrete

place. This pattern of interconnectedness forms a whole that is more than the sum of its parts, and the ground of this felt whole is the human body rooting itself historically, socially, and ethically in the environment.

By way of a pedagogical reminder, we can lay down the following table of metaphysical connections:

*There is no Being
without Place*
for there is no
consciousness
without place
no history
without place
no speech
without place
no language
without place
no action
without place.

To teach design is to evoke the power of a particular place. That power is anchored in the whole that speaks through its particular parts.

The final presentation began with these words: "For the first time in history, hell has become a technical possibility rather than [just] a spiritual reality." The theme was Architecture and the Sacred; it can serve both as a beginning and a completion of these metaphysical reflections.

The drive behind our industrialized society is the manufacture of desire. Congealed in objects and

made into a fetish, this alienation of the self from its own most proper concerns creates a social world dependent upon self-estrangement for its survival. Furthermore, this ultimate irrationality is turned into a highly concentrated form of rationality through planning, marketing, and consumerism. It throws up alongside its rush towards gratification a suitable architecture—one that reflects the interchangeable quality of desires; that is to say, a built environment that is always and everywhere the same.

To be driven towards what is not in our best interest seems the very definition of evil. Seeking completion, we desire what shatters our integration as persons. Desire is not the problem. Since we are finite we never become self-sufficient. Desire is the sign of our humanity. What matters most are the objects offered for the satisfaction of our desires. Their pitiful quality suggests the growing decadence of our culture. However, life has its own cunning and despite our dissatisfactions, we continue to experience an insatiable urge towards wholeness. Due to the quantification of existence, however, our culture identifies being with having. The resultant addition never really adds up because there is always an additional "more" to be had. Failing to understand that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, we go on recklessly

adding more and more and end up with only parts and more parts. These parts, at best, tend to be concentrations of wealth and power used to influence our society towards “better” things; at worst, they signal only the viciously intense presence of greed.

This bleak landscape of failed desire can be changed by “recollecting the Sacred.” What is the Sacred? It is the Whole that expresses itself through the insistent particularity of its parts. Such a whole does not yield itself to quantitative analysis. The “how much?” asks the wrong question. To interrogate the Sacred means to ask after the quality, value, and meaning of the particular. This is what Tennyson intended by his “eternity in a grain of sand.” It is also what Zen sees in the commonplace and the ordinary.

From this perspective the importance of phenomenology with its insistence upon “a return to things themselves” is made clear. Environmental understanding and its application to design must back away from our contemporary condition of high abstraction. The extreme of quantitative and reductionist planning needs radical correction. Phenomenology which sees all relations as harboring and expressing meaning provides a method whereby we can locate the whole that unites

its parts into a more significant unity.

What this means explicitly for environmental design can be fairly clearly stated. Whenever a designer looks at an environment, three principles must be foremost in his mind. First, things are *meanings*, not material objects. Second, these meanings are nodal points of expression that open out into a field of relationships. Third, the goal of environmental design is to knit together these concentrations of meaning so that the participant-dweller can experience the radical unity that binds up these different qualities.

Sacred architecture, in particular the Gothic style, is a paradigmatic example of this. At bottom and in essence the medieval energy that created Chartres saw that all building is interconnectedness. Furthermore, this ensemble of wholeness had a double level—both functionally and symbolically it addressed the human person as a whole. This layering established connections between levels so that a single “thing” could express two or more meanings at the same time. Thus a polyvalent symbolism emerged that provided a point and moment of convergence within which the whole and its parts could be experienced. I speak, of course, of the architecture of light that is at the heart of the stone of Chartres. The

first “solar” architecture suggests to us what we can do with our own more profane environment. The suffusion of the whole through the parts and the parts’ particular mirroring of that luminous whole constitute the “more” of the Sacred. The metaphysical genius of Medieval Being created a vertical axis that allows for the horizontal spread of the human as its mirror-image.

Throughout the architecture of the Sacred there is an insistence upon limitations of the human condition. Yet paradoxically, this endorsement of finitude evokes the sense of the infinite. The gift of finitude is the recognition of what lies beyond. Once more, we see the principle of identity through difference yielding up a sober and concrete truth: It is the finite that grants access to the infinite.

The ultimate human recognition of finitude is death. What does the question of death have to do with environmental design? Our landscape is littered with the bloated corpses of desire. Everywhere one looks, the objects of failed desire obstruct our view: Shopping malls, parked cars, discarded furniture, and obsolete appliances—to name but a few elements of our *de trop* culture. At the same time, scarcity and limits are used to describe our era. How can we reconcile these opposing realities?

When we speak of death, we speak of the human experience of the end of time. This is the heart of our conflict. It separates us from nature. In nature one sees processes evolving in time towards wholeness and incompleteness. That is to say, in nature, the flower that completes the shrub dies as its seed is cast forth to begin the cycle again. Passage characterizes natural time, and the wholeness that is encountered in nature forever leads towards incompleteness. To be whole and incomplete is nature's answer to the riddle of death.

And what of our human response? Do we refuse the gift? And how can death be regarded as a gift? Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* called death "my ownmost possibility." This means that death is the occasion for authenticity; that is to say, I can only *be* myself when I face up to my own possibility of not being. Death seals my being with a stamp of resoluteness. It is in the face of my death that I achieve my being through my activities. Thus death is no enemy. It is rather "my own."

In a culture plagued by failed desires such words are bitter medicine.⁴ Yet they capture the essence of the metaphysics that lay at the heart of our environmental discourse. To be a "One," a definite this, is not to be another. Owning up to one's limits is the meaning of the acceptance of death. Nature

has no difficulty in attaining this, for its wholeness constitutes a passage into incompleteness that makes death understandable and bearable. In a culture such as ours no equivalent understanding of limit and death seems available. We preach frugality but squander our present for the sake of having more. We deny death as a matter of cultural course.

The radiant derives from the unity of wholeness. It flows from a single source, establishing lines of connection throughout the world. In following these lines of radiance as they shine through our bleak landscape, certain objective lessons stand forth.

In the first place, understanding of the human/environmental matrix must proceed by way of unity. To be together, however, is not to descend into an undifferentiated sameness. Such a lack of difference is the very hallmark of our built environment. Rather what is required is the unity that arises through real, particular, insistent parts relating to a complete whole. This one, as we may wish to call it, is more than the sum of its parts. The "more" associated with the whole is the result of its fundamental drive towards novelty, difference, and change. This is the lesson of nature. The completeness of nature concludes with an invitation to start again. Thus death is the passage to a fresh start.

Novelty arises from the perpetually perishing. Being born and dying constitute the boundaries whereby the universe edges into the advance of novelty.⁵

From this metaphysical perspective, death is the very gift of value itself. It sets limits and lets us be our very real, particular, insistent, and stubborn selves; yet this finitude by reason of the whole passes over into the whole and thereby adds to its weight, value, and passage. If we seek immortality, it can be said that the opportunity is already there. We become part of the great community, and our contributions are not measured by reason of self-interest but rather by their meaning for others and for the whole. Thus a metaphysics of unity through relations of meaning lifts from the shoulders of humankind the need for selfish satisfaction of desires. In place of our fragmented landscape of bleak desires, we face a beckoning whole that invites our individual participation.

In sum, then, the environment—natural or built—shows forth a relational unity that suggests ever wider wholes tending toward incompleteness. At the very least environmental studies ought to incorporate analogical thought within scientific studies. Such comparative thinking would allow us to think limit, particularity, parts, and even desire and human death

against a backdrop of meaning, wholeness, unity, and activity. Such thinking constitutes a new course of study for all students of the environment—an educational whole that would replace the obsessive craving for technique that now dominates much of what passes for ecological study. Metaphysics, in other words, has never died. It lies obscured at the heart of all environmental inquiry that seeks a complete self-understanding.

NOTES

- 1 The Symposium took place in the Fall of 1983 under the aegis of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences. Participants whose papers were drawn upon in this work include: Robert Mugerauer, Botand Bognar, and Gary Coates. Further information about the participants can be obtained by writing the Chairman, Professor David Seamon, Department of Architecture, Kansas State University, Manhattan, ks.
- 2 This is, of course, the thought of Hegel. See the "Preface" to *The Phenomenology of Mind*.
- 3 Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is a sustained analysis of this primacy of somatic intelligence in terms of our being in the world.
- 4 See, for example, Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* for a complex analysis of how the refusal to die constitutes the very ground of our culture.
- 5 The work of Alfred North Whitehead is a complete and coherent study of the meaning of this insight. See, for example, Part V, "God and the World," in *Process and Reality*.