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1. Layering



Creating layers is one of the simplest, yet most effective, strategies for expanding the information that a design can hold. Layers and overlapping in walls and spaces, like the layering of windows on a computer screen, allow us to dwell on the consideration of one level of information without losing track of a larger pattern or set of connections.

Walls with niches and projecting shelves can hold layers of objects and figures that elaborate the visual context, prompting associations that carry the mind through diverse areas of time and space (and allowing for change in the selection of those objects and their suggestions). Architects also often conceive spaces by layering differing kinds of decisions: the flowing complicated space of a room may be layered with the precise, reassuring measurements of a visible rhythmic structure in the walls or roof. This is profoundly effective in the vaults and walls of Gothic cathedrals, for instance, where ribs, recesses and aisles trace illuminating patterns through thickets of stone, allowing the mind to both grasp and explore the complexities of the space. The layers of inscribed regular measurement in classically ordered rooms also serve well to construct apparent order within the shifting circumstances of use.

Modest dwellings have no less need to be both lucid and suggestive, if they are to serve us well. Places that allow movement between successive layers of building and landscape provide for an outgoing rich with choice and possibilities for experience. Openings, porches, columns and fenced yards build up layered zones that can accommodate diverse activities (watching, snoozing, leaning, gardening). These structure various degrees of exposure to the common realm and modulate the relations between dwelling and outgoing.

Whole communities may also be conceived in layers, as illustrated in the plan for a segment of Louisville presented by Raymond L. Gindroz. There the various patterns of access, vegetation, building type and institutional location were layered into a contrapuntal plan that provides a multifaceted environment, concretely related to the conditions of the place. Such places offer zones of differentiated space, which multiple inhabitants may fill with their activities and imagining.

Another device for creating layers of meaning and connection to place is what one participant described as “latching on to something that I had nothing to do with”—in other words, absorbing into the process of composing a place some aspect of what is already there. Latching on to, or incorporating, initiatives not one’s own is a fundamental form of enrichment, adding depth to the experiences that a place can afford. It can mean borrowing site-specific wisdom already resident in the place. Both familiar public space structure and predictable forms of building can provide an essential path to common understanding for the residents of the community.

To sustain continued attention and interest, however, the places we build need to extend and transform the qualities with which they are connecting. The Andersson house, described by Chris Wise, does this with modesty, grace and wit. The Cibollo Creek Ranch compound, with fortified farm and additions, preserves an historical structure and, at first, appears to replicate it in the addition. Yet the compound is subtly and decisively establishing new patterns of living, layering them onto the powerful, foreboding form and organization of this adobe dwelling lodged in the desert.