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Seven Connected Propositions For Those Who Make Places

Llewellyn Seibold

"I recall the beginning as Belief. It is the time of realization of Form. It is feeling as religion, and thought as philosophy. Then there is no material no shape no dimension." — Louis Kahn

Introduction

In the making of places it is often the unstated first thoughts which determine the direction of subsequent architectural considerations and the dominant compositional characteristics. These beginnings can be rich and full of potential or lifeless and myopic. A beginning has the full potential to become more than a limited set of cultural or personal attitudes when it seeks the primordial realizations of form. For Louis Kahn, this was a continual point of departure since form was not the configured and material object but the search for institutions fundamental to life. These notions are helpful, for then one can restate the most often asked question of "What does one do?" into a prior question which asks why one desires to make places. In Kahn's terms this seems to be the "beginning as Belief." A commitment to the study and practice of the architectural discipline must rest in a conviction that the making of meaningful places is fundamental and necessary to man's dwelling. The following propositions propose a basis for this belief through a series of linked thoughts about the constituents of dwelling place within the context of creative intention.

It is possible to see dwelling as an involvement in the thematic patterns and processes of the life-world we experience. The underlying premise of the following propositions is that dwelling is an act, which represents the question which asks what the essential order is of our universal and particular worlds. Potential answers lie within the question, as methods of inquiry lie in the principles which animate and make conscious the act of dwelling. Within the making of rooms, houses, gardens, and streets lie precise manifestations of the inquiry and subsequent ways of dwelling. These forms require continuous evaluation as we check their characteristics against meaningful experience. We owe a great deal to those who have confronted the question of dwelling and applied themselves to making places which embody a convincing spirit.

Works of those educated in the formal discipline of architecture, as well as folk builders, will be used as examples furthering our understanding of each proposition.

1. To Build, to Plant, and to Restore Affirms Dwelling

Building, planting, and restoring become affirmations of dwelling when they serve principal and tangible meanings within our houses, gardens, cities and landscapes. The establishment of a group's commitment to a locale serves a primary need to focus the task of finding the best and highest good for places. A belief about dwelling in a particular place spawns a constructive concern and care for the elements of the environment which give meaning and support to experience. At times we are reminded, by destructive results, of those designers and users whose commitment to places had been transitory or disinterested.

Many vernacular settlements show us that the question of what it means to dwell has been actively pursued and that a belief in a particular place has been established. The clay-walled buildings of the Germans from Russia, an immigrant group on the North American Plains, portray this affirmation of dwelling in a place (Figure 1). By physical necessity these low, thick-walled buildings submit to the order of the landscape and existent material sources within a sphere of complex cultural ideals. They express a commitment to find and inhabit those places which would support the long held vocation of planting prairie soils with wheat. Dwelling is more than instinct for shelter or territory, but becomes a means of inquiry which brings us to question what kind of attitude is held about a place.

Artifacts and constructions provide a concrete way of knowing what man's attitude and world view are. The ephemeral ideals of culture take on a more precise measure when one considers the place as one of constructed forms. A comparative study of culture and form is useful to those who make places, for patterns of understanding emerge which can clarify the more universal aspects of place experience. It may also confirm that the designer is indeed communicating the intention and meaning of a particular body of people.
The concrete measure of man relative to an extended inquiry into the distant and recent past can also be studied from the perspective of time and a study of historical types. Again, the comparative measure allows one to find similarities and differences and the need to participate by finding commonality.

The windows of Quebec provide an example of this two-fold sense (Figure 3). A distinct individual identity results from the care that is given to the flowers and lace which adorn the window opening. On another scale, cultural identity is seen in the use of particular colors on door surfaces and window frames. This is part of a more prevalent cultural identity in the Province of Quebec. Last, the window’s basic pattern belongs to a family of forms recognized as windows or portals—the openings in the wall, the eye of the house. Both reveal and conceal the life beyond.

4. Place is Shaped by Experiential Understanding

The experience of places occurs in a series of environmental levels from a favorite chair, to house, to neighborhood, to city, to landscape. These places make up the totality of our environmental experience. Observations which are personally appropriated become the best means of understanding the relationship between the many layers of existence.

The recollection of a favored place can be recalled and analyzed for the constituent physical characteristics which allow particular experiences to happen. It becomes difficult to imagine an experience without having some recollection of the place in which it occurred. When asked to recall memories of us all can bring to mind some place which is deeply imprinted in our consciousness. The experiences of childhood are most poignant. Figure 4 is an image of a place which contained a rich experience for me as a child. What is shown is a view of newly planted, rolling agricultural land, a dominant horizon line and a vaulting deep blue sky. I recall walking down an endless ribbon of road at the end of a summer’s day. The road traced the imaginary lines of the system of cardinal points which order this world. This expansive landscape of limitless extension provoked question after question. What was beyond forever? Who resided in the place beyond forever? The landscape constituents and their relationship surely contained the impetus for these type of questions.

5. Understanding Searches: What One Does, Where One Does, and How One Does

This proposition begins to move toward a more complete and unified body of working thoughts. Three categories of concern can be engaged by the maker of places as generative thought is given to the art of designing.
The Bagsvaerd Church by Jørn Utzon is an example which shows thoughtful consideration of all these concerns. The fundamental nature of a place to gather and worship is established within a dualistic typological framework. The Deity as transcendent is built concretely into the form of the building's section, drawing upon the metaphors of light, sky, and clouds (Figure 5). The Deity as immanent and local is developed in the central nature of gathering places as shown in plan. The central path contains a critical unity of these essential types as it ends the passage and reaches upward in a cross. Within these forms and element scales is contained the duality of transcendence and immanence in the Christian tradition. The basic topological structure sets up a very direct order of passages which connect and enclose the places of repose (Figure 6). The morphological order invokes an atmosphere of controlled directness and contemplation through the use of material and manner of workmanship (Figure 7).

Patterns of form, shape, and order proceed from the recognition of thematic wholes—a sense for overall outcomes rather than transient change. The potential energy of the creative act is stored by thought which discriminates and groups thematic patterns. An analysis of various creation accounts in literature can be helpful in understanding the act and meanings associated with bringing together the patterns which support dwelling. The familiar Genesis account portrays the separation and gathering of light from darkness, vapor above from below, and water from earth. A cosmos is formed from chaos. The relationship of constituent elements—water, earth, vapor, and light—form a variety of orders upon which our experience of landscapes is based. Within the constituent elements are contained the characteristics which give meaning and purpose to phenomenal existence. As time is given by the duration in the presence of light and dark it also becomes a figure of the known and unknown. Earth becomes the substance of our sustenance while water becomes the progenitor force, a giver of life. Vapor above separated from vapor below begins to suggest the important orientational discrimination of up from down.

Stockholm's Woodland Cemetery by Swedish architects Asplund and Lewerentz is a discrete gathering of the elements of earth, water, sky and light into a pattern of meaningful order. Within a pervasive forest texture, a central path is laid which gathers a meadow around it (Figure 8). As this path moves toward the center of the cemetery's domain, a poignant image of a gently rising knoll, a placid pool of water, and a dark silhouetted cross, emerges from the carefully gathered elements of the crematorium's edge (Figure 9). The skillful combination of dark and light, rising and falling, earth, water, and sky speak to both universal and particular types of experience. The separation and gathering of elemental units of world portray a coherent existential order within this work.

Conclusion

From the all important placement
an edge one begins to elaborate, define, redefine, and develop design intention. It is useful to slide with facility from parts to the whole and back to parts. As the relationship of the building to the landscape is studied, the method of joining brick to window frame may be deliberated. From an attitude of inquiry, one searches for an essence which will pervade the work and carry it forward with an inner momentum. The progressive revealing of form as a design method relies on careful attention in the act of consideration and the study of intention through a variety and scale of notational types: modeled, drawn, and verbal. This progressive and cyclical search for form is favored over a method which defines a quantitative or stylistic interpretation of form.

Needed more than a predetermined end, is a set of guides which can be used to generate and check the underlying integrity of the work. The following are couplets which represent a range of dialectic thought frames which can be engaged in the act of making places.

**Cosmos and Chaos**
- The meaningful order and the purposeless disorder
  (a check for continuity)
- The greater and the lesser
  (a check for hierarchical distinction)
- The presence of darkness and the presence of light
  (a check for characteristic and intensity)
- The direction and the centered
  (a check for scale)
- The ordering principle and the programmatic necessity
  (a check for principle order and program response)
- The relative position and dimensional configuration
  (a check for spatial orientation and proportion)

**Spirit and Reason**
- The verve of vision and the discipline of system
  (a check for continuity)
- The monument, the human, and the miniature
  (a check for scale)
- The portal and the wall
  (a check for edge characteristics—layered, implied, overlapping, or definitive)
- The garden and the prospect
  (a check for density and grouping)

**Universal and Particular**
- The general and the local
  (a check for archetypes and socio/cultural meanings)
- The permanent and the transitory
  (a check for longevity and immediacy)
- The rhythmic figure and the repetitive ground
  (a check for continuity)
- The presence of darkness and the presence of light
  (a check for characteristic and intensity)
- The direction and the centered
  (a check for shape, directionality, linkage or interpretation)

**Timeless and Temporal**
- The profane and the sacred
  (a check for experience and essences)
- The near and the far
  (a check for experience and essences)
- The rhythmic figure and the repetitive ground
  (a check for continuity)

**Immanence and Transcendence**
- The underlying integrity of the work
  (a check for continuity)
- The presence of darkness and the presence of light
  (a check for characteristic and intensity)
- The rhythmic figure and the repetitive ground
  (a check for continuity)
- The directional and the centered
  (a check for shape, directionality, linkage or interpretation)

**Duration and Interval**
- The verve of vision and the discipline of system
  (a check for continuity)
- The monument, the human, and the miniature
  (a check for scale)
- The portal and the wall
  (a check for edge characteristics—layered, implied, overlapping, or definitive)
- The garden and the prospect
  (a check for density and grouping)

**Passage and Repose**
- The rhythmic figure and the repetitive ground
  (a check for continuity)
- The greater and the lesser
  (a check for hierarchical distinction)
- The presence of darkness and the presence of light
  (a check for characteristic and intensity)
- The direction and the centered
  (a check for shape, directionality, linkage or interpretation)

**Large and Small**
- The monumental, the human, and the miniature
  (a check for scale)
- The portal and the wall
  (a check for edge characteristics—layered, implied, overlapping, or definitive)
- The garden and the prospect
  (a check for density and grouping)

**Open and Closed**
- The rhythmic figure and the repetitive ground
  (a check for continuity)
- The greater and the lesser
  (a check for hierarchical distinction)
- The presence of darkness and the presence of light
  (a check for characteristic and intensity)
- The direction and the centered
  (a check for shape, directionality, linkage or interpretation)

**Within and Without**
- The rhythmic figure and the repetitive ground
  (a check for continuity)
- The greater and the lesser
  (a check for hierarchical distinction)
- The presence of darkness and the presence of light
  (a check for characteristic and intensity)
- The direction and the centered
  (a check for shape, directionality, linkage or interpretation)

**Rising and Falling**
- The up and the down
  (a check for vertical relationship and meanings)

By addressing the question of dwelling we reaffirm our commitment to places—a commitment which both identifies us and opens us to the processes of the local and general worlds of being. The proceeding propositions, dialectic couplets, and exemplar works need also to be contained within an established pattern of inquiry which needs to be checked for its usefulness in the making of places. Unless we pose significant questions about the nature of dwelling, the prospect for places which ring with convincing qualities is not good. With the investment of care in the search for what it means to dwell, fine rooms will be built, wonderful gardens will be planted, and we will restore our collective landscape.

### NOTES
5. These categories are a summation adapted from an article by Christian Norberg-Schulz, "Kahn, Heidegger and the Language of Architecture." *Oppositions* 8. 1979.
7. This account can be found in *The Bible,* Genesis 1:1–10.