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Ingredients of the Whole: Intuition, Environment, and Development

Neal Rassman

Despite Noah Webster's best efforts, design and process are difficult words to define. Individually they resist our efforts to pin them down neatly as if they were the wings of an exotic insect on display. We should applaud this resistance. Collectively their meaning is no more resolute. At best they are slippery terms, and when incanted by designer-types they become pure quicksilver. Perhaps it is well that we pass them by, at least for the moment, and instead concentrate on a similar notion: inspiration.

Ancient mythology asks us to trust in the Muses for inspiration. These nine sister goddesses of Greek folklore may have served countless poets and others at moments of despair. In turn, these poets have urged us to "consult the genius of the place in all,"¹ and occasionally we do. But for every poet helped, far more linger at a desk, alone, with flawed images, inadequate thoughts, and blank pages. Even a quick glance at our designed environment must make us aware that the Muses are too few in number to help us at all. However delicious her charms, the idea of waiting patiently for an ethereal mistress to squeeze us into her busy schedule does not sit square with the rapid pace of our lives.

Vaulting ego and faith in native ability demand that we trust in our unreasoned intuitions as a source of inspiration. Intuition can produce wonders, but it also can be very wrong, and as tardy



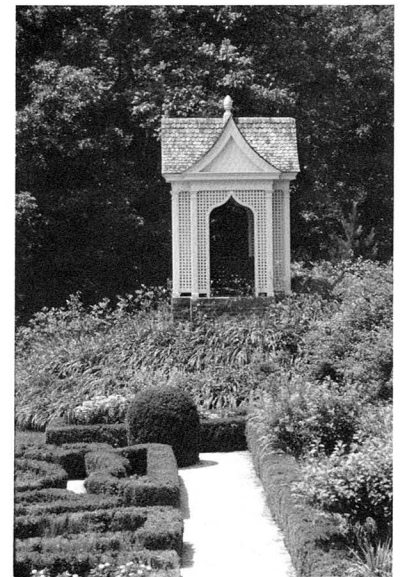
Amana Colony, Iowa.

as the Muses. The shelf life of tuition is short, and when it first fails us our confidence is shaken to the marrow. "His talent was as natural as the pattern that was made by the dust on a butterfly's wings. At one time he understood it no more than the butterfly did and he did not know when it was brushed or marred. Later he became conscious of his damaged wings and of their construction and he learned to think and could not fly anymore because the love of flight was gone and he could only remember when it had been effortless."² Clearly there must be something more dependable than intuitive feelings.

Recent dogma would have us trust in logic and reason to produce inspiration. Methodology becomes an industrial assembly line, with ourselves and our precious analysis moving

dutifully from one phase, station, or energy point to another. Discipline and loyalty to the procedure are the prime tenets. It is not a surprise that methodology produces and assembles rather than inspires. Like a well lubricated machine, it works dependably and without complaint, making efficient spaces, clean shapes, and crisp edges. But what of human aspiration?

Divine intervention, emotion, and logic can each mislead, deceive, and fail to inspire. Yet, each can be a wellspring of creativity, and should not be abandoned because a brief summer drought dries up the cistern. Nor should we protest too much the muddied water surrounding the notion of design process. A little confusion will not hurt our delicate constitutions. Whether we believe and understand or whether we are skept-



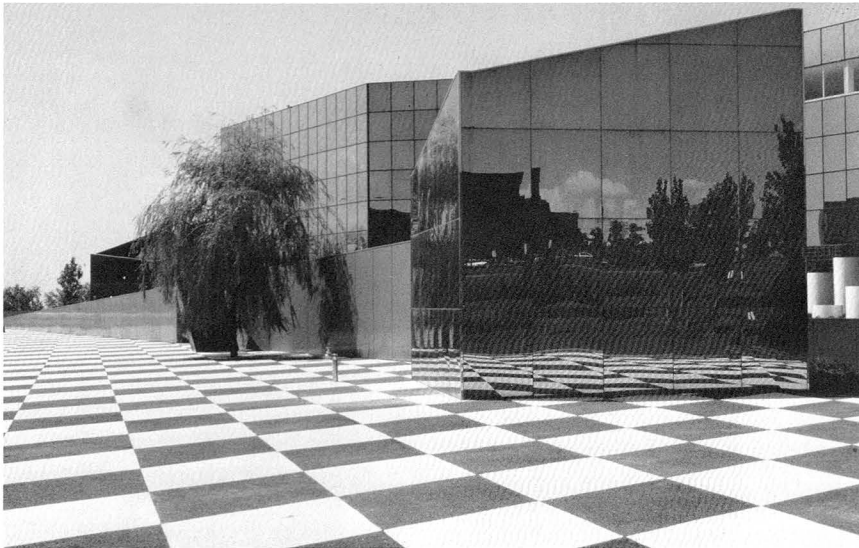
Gunston Hall, Virginia. 1760.



Cherokee Park, Kentucky. 1890.



Stourhead, Wilt., England. 1740.



Harlequin Plaza, Denver, Colorado. 1980.



Manhattan, Kansas. 1983.

tical, design processes do exist and are of use. But like a hero of ancient drama, process has a tragic flaw. The nature of a design process focuses on the problem to be solved, paying little or no attention to the designer. We, in effect, exclude ourselves from the process, and this exclusion robs both us and our work. A design process should express the development of the designer. Pick a process, any process; it makes little difference which we select. However, we should approach the process mindful and soulful of our own development.

Our personal development stems from two factors: those of birth or



Villa Arrighetti, Florence, Italy. 1650.

genetics and those of surroundings or environment. Our development as designers is also determined in a similar manner.

As a landscape architect, my genetic make-up — my birth if you will — is the result of a polygamous heritage. I have, or hope to claim, the genes of Pepton, LeNotre, Olmsted, Church, and others. My claim may seem as tenuous as a genealogical chart relating us to half the royal families of Europe, the headmen of the tribes of Israel, and assorted Revolutionary War patriots, but it is a claim that I must press. My development as a designer depends on this relationship.



Freeway Park, Washington. 1970.

It is my heritage; without it I would be lost, and from it I draw great inspiration. I cannot deny my creative forebearers any more than I can deny the facts of my physical birth. My relationship to Church is as irrefutable as the relationship I have with the genes that made my hairline recede and now seem intent on its eventual disappearance.

This is not a mere appeal for historicism, but rather an appeal for health of self and self-knowledge. If we are to be a part of the process, we must understand who we are and must be comfortable with that understanding.

Environment is the other critical factor in our development. Our character is imprinted genetically and is nurtured by our surroundings. As my feeling for heritage was not a plea for eclecticism, this emphasis on surroundings is not necessarily a cry for regionalism. Environment, both natural and social, is a frequent source of design thought however literal or trite the interpretation might be. My goal is not to use environment as a pattern or model, though I could do worse, but rather to let my understanding of it make me whole.

I live in Kansas, but feel no particular urge to stylize either the tawny horizontal of the prairie or the plaid of a farmer's shirt. I am not a buffalo on a range, but rather a town dweller on a grid. I am not compelled to copy the old fashioned fan trellises or the whirligigs I find in so many widow's gardens. To do so might only demean and not honor. I esteem their expression, as I bask in the glow of the soundness of my surroundings, and I draw internal strength from it.

Process is valid, but only as long as we are healthy participants. We are seekers of inspiration and truly find it only within our own complexity. We must be in harmony with our past and our present condition. Saccharinity and torment are both included. Our development is the key to our makeup, and we are the sources of expression. Process is only a childlike way of explaining the events and causes of expression, much like the oversimplistic explanation a doctor might give a patient concerning a complicated illness.

NOTES

1. Alexander Pope, "Epistle to Lord Burlington."
2. Ernest Hemmingway, *A Moveable Feast*, C. Scribner's Sons, New York, New York, 1964.