



# Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology

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**T**his *EAP* starts 23 years. We thank readers renewing subscriptions and include a reminder for “delinquents.” We are grateful to subscribers who contributed more than the base subscription. Thank you!

This issue includes three feature essays. First, management and systems consultant **Robert Fabian** overviews his growing awareness of the importance of human dimensions of urban design, and Norwegian architect **Akkelies van Nes** considers architectural theorist **Christian Norberg-Schulz’s** contribution to a phenomenology of place and architecture. Last, retired educator **John Cameron** sends another “letter” from his rural home on Tasmania’s Bruny Island. Accompanying his account of place as “gift” is art work by his life partner, artist

**Vicki King.** Below, we feature her “Before the Storm.” Also see her work on pages 13, 16, and 18.

## IHSR Conference, Montreal

The 31<sup>st</sup> annual **International Human Science Research Conference** will be hosted by the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM), June 25-29, 2012. The theme of the conference is “Renewing the Encounter between Human Sciences, the Arts, and the Humanities.” Conference organizers are psychologists **Christian Thiboutot**, **Florence Vinit**, and **Bernd Jager**. Paper titles and abstracts are due by January 29, 2012. Tentatively, *EAP* plans to sponsor at least one special session relating to environmental and architectural phenomenology. Conference website: [www.ihsr2012.uqam.ca/](http://www.ihsr2012.uqam.ca/).



## Donors, 2012

We are grateful to the following readers contributing more than the base subscription for 2012.

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## Items of Interest

The 4<sup>th</sup> annual **Geo-aesthetics Conference** will be held March 9-10, 2012, at Towson University in Towson, Maryland. The conference theme is “The Seduction of the Senuous.” For information, contact [jmurungi@townson.edu](mailto:jmurungi@townson.edu).

**Back to the Things Themselves**, a panel focusing on “doing phenomenology,” will be an event at the annual meeting of the **Society for Existential and Phenomenology Theory and Culture (EPTC)**, to be held at Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Canada, May 29-June 1, 2012. Contact: Prof. David Koukal at [koukaldr@udmercy.edu](mailto:koukaldr@udmercy.edu).

The **International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture (ISSRNC)** will hold its next conference in Malibu, California, at Pepperdine University in August 2012. The conference theme will be “Nature and the Popular Imagination.” [www.religionandnature.com/society/](http://www.religionandnature.com/society/).

The 8th **International Design & Emotion Conference** will be held September 11-14, 2012, in London. Established in 1999, the Design and Emotion Society is an international network of researchers, designers and companies sharing an interest in experience-driven design. [www.designandemotion.org/](http://www.designandemotion.org/).

A workshop/retreat, **Contemplative Environmental Studies: Pedagogy for Self and Planet**, will be

held July 1-7, 2012 at the Lama Foundation in San Cristobal, New Mexico. The event is said to focus on “the interface between environmental challenges and contemplative practices with the understanding that the latter can provide access to inner resources for understanding and responding meaningfully to environmental issues.” [joe@lamafoundation.org](mailto:joe@lamafoundation.org).

## Citations Received

**Clare Cooper Marcus, 2010. *Iona Dreaming: The Healing Power of Place*. Lake Worth, Florida: Nicolas Hays.**

As many *EAP* readers know, Cooper Marcus is a major figure in environment-behavior research. In this book, described as a “memoir,” she reflects on her life through her multi-year experiences with the Scottish Island of Iona, for which she feels a “powerful attachment” and “mysterious attraction.”

She writes: “Are some people more attached to places than others? For those who are not, do they live a diminished life? To become attached to a place, we need to perceive it, to know it, to understand it—then to engage in effective action, to preserve and steward it. When we love a place, does it love us back?”

“When 19<sup>th</sup>-century English nature poet John Clare had to move from the village of Helpstone where he had spent his whole life, to Northborough in the fens, he grieved for the place he was leaving behind—not only because of how well he knew and loved it, but because the place had known him. He referred in a poem to the setting that had touched his heart as ‘... sweet spots that memory makes divine’.” See side bar, next page.

**Jeff Malpas, editor, 2011. *The Place of Landscape: Concepts, Contexts, Studies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.**

The 16 chapters of this edited collection are said to “examine the character of landscape as itself a mode of place as well as the modes of place that appear in relation to landscape.... The essays demonstrate that the study of landscape cannot be restricted to any one genre, cannot be taken as the exclusive province of any one discipline, and cannot be exhausted by any single form of analysis.”

**Prakash Nair, Randall Fielding, & Jeffery Lackney, 2009. *The Language of School Design: Design Patterns for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools*. Minneapolis: International Forum for Innovative Schools.**

Drawing on a pattern-language format, these architect/planners attempt to synthesize “learning research with

best practice in school planning and design.” The authors include 28 patterns that range from “principal learning areas” and “welcoming entry” to “local signature,” “connected to community,” and “home-like bathrooms.” Well illustrated with conceptual drawings and school photographs, all in color.

**Paul Shaw, 2010. *Helvetica and the New York City Subway System*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.**

This graphic designer examines “how New York City subway signage evolved from a ‘visual mess’ to a uniform system with Helvetica triumphant.” Shaw describes how the slow typographic changeover happened, supplementing his text with more than 250 images—photographs, sketches, type samples, and documents. He places this signage evolution in the context of the history of the New York City subway system, of 1960s transportation signage, of Unimark International [the design firm that created the signage system], and of Helvetica itself.

**Charlene Spretnak, 2011. *Relational Reality: New Discoveries of Interrelatedness that are Transforming the Modern World*. Topsham, Maine: Green Horizon.**

This writer explores “the coherence among numerous surprising discoveries of the interrelated nature of reality.” Her argument is based “on the realization that all entities in this world, including humans, are thoroughly relational beings of great complexity who are both composed of and nested within networks of creative, dynamic interrelationships.” Spretnak includes chapters on education, health care, and community design and architecture.

**George Wuerthner, editor, 2007. *Thrillcraft: The Environmental Consequences of Motorized Recreation*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green.**

Well illustrated with deeply troubling photographs, the essays of this volume examine the devastating environmental impact of motorized recreation. The argument is made that “common-sense principles of recreational ethics and land stewardship justify strictly limiting the use of off-road vehicles on public lands. Current practices and policies are unfair to the majority of public land users and unjust to the many organisms that depend on these lands for survival.”

**Filipa Matos Wunderlich, 2008. *Walking and Rhythmicity: Sensing Urban Space*. *Journal of Urban Design*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 125-39.**

Taking a phenomenological perspective, this article focuses on “the experience of walking in the city and its relationship to sense of place.” Three modes of walking are identified: the purposeful, discursive, and conceptual. The article also inter-

prets walking as “a temporal and rhythmical practice, part of a wider group of place-rhythms that characterize urban places.”

## **From *Iona Dreaming***

Day after day, an image of some particular spot on the island insistently appears in my mind and, with pen in hand and pad of paper propped on my knees, I try to capture the *anima loci*, the soul of the place. But, like a wild spirit, it eludes capture and squirms free into the breaking waves. It is said that, when Felix Mendelssohn visited the west of Scotland in 1829, his sisters asked him on his return to tell them something about the Hebrides. “It cannot be told, only played,” he said. Seating himself at the piano, he played the theme that afterward grew into the *Hebrides Overture*.

Many have come here to write, to paint, to compose poetry. In a slim volume I bought in the village, *An Iona Anthology*, I find that writings about the magic of the island span fourteen centuries, from the sixth to the 20<sup>th</sup>. On the verge of the 21<sup>st</sup>, I am also drawn to record some of what I sense here—to be a mediator between the essence of place and human experience. I write, not to urge others to travel from afar to this remote island, but to encourage them to experience deeply their own sacred place and to access the kind of deep peace that I have found on Iona.

Drawn to particular places on the island, I trust the call; this is an exercise in surrender.... It feels as if I am living at some level of consciousness for which I have no name. It is neither busy, social, alert awakens; nor is it nighttime dreaming. It is somewhere in between. I call it island consciousness, daytime dreaming. In this place, it is as if time and space do not exist and I have entered another dimension only fractionally apart from the material world....

Could I have this experience somewhere else—on some other island, in some other landscape? Perhaps. But for me, it is Iona... that seems to invite me to relax into the deepest part of my being. Iona has become a mirror for my soul.

—C. Cooper Marcus, *Iona Dreaming*, pp. 206-07

# Discovering Urban Design

Robert Fabian

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*Fabian is a retired Canadian management and systems consultant. He was the first Chair of Computer Science at York University in Toronto. He is now involved in downtown Toronto neighborhood matters and works to improve a small property he and his wife have on southern Ontario's Trent-Severn Waterway. See his website at: [www.fabian.ca](http://www.fabian.ca). © 2012 Robert Fabian.*

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Recently, I have come somewhat belatedly to recognize the importance of built form and space in establishing our context for living. The discovery process started after I turned 65 and began to withdraw from active consulting. In the hope that others may find value in seeing the steps I took, this is the story of my growth toward urban design enlightenment.

I had been educated to seek Truth that would be valid anywhere and everywhere. Given that all my degrees were in mathematics, that assumption about knowledge should not be surprising. Truth was to be context-free. But reality began to intrude even during the time my focus was on computer systems. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with organizational-development psychologist Eric Trist, who helped me see the value of a socio-technical approach. I came to realize that social context is critical to understanding how systems actually work.

The research I did with Trist led me into full-time consulting—I decided to see if what I was professing had real-world relevance. The socio-technical view, while important to me, was not generally important to clients. As a “computer consultant,” one of my growing concerns was with what it should mean to be an information-technology (IT) professional. That aim led me to reflect on codes of professional ethics. After considerable thrashing about, I came to see that philosopher Stephen Toulmin had it right in *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (with Albert Jonsen; Univ. of California Press, 1988). There are only accepted ethical precedents. The challenge is to argue from those precedents to action that fit the situation, certainly a context-sensitive perspective.

When I passed 65 and without the press of new consulting business, I began reading about the importance of social and historical context in human life. Given what I saw about me in society, the Communitarian movement attracted me. It's important to balance rights and responsibilities. And the social context—the “community”—is key to understanding what drives us and what we value. I also began to appreciate the importance of social history as Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky understood it.

All of that had been fermenting in the background. Then a Toronto developer can forward with a proposal to put up twin 58-story towers 30 feet from our condominium window. I experienced a strong NIMBY (“Not in My Back Yard”) reaction. But early on I also recognized that nothing protects the view, at least not in downtown Toronto. If the proposal was to be turned into something positive, I would need to look elsewhere than to NIMBYism.

The proposed architecture was an example of what has been called “glass brutalism”—oppressive glass towers with no redeeming features. The architecture could certainly have been improved, but too much would still have been jammed on a lot too small. My concerns went beyond architecture. But expanding to an urban-planning scope was too broad. It would be both politically difficult to address and would not allow concerns of the local impact of the proposed building to be properly considered. Urban design was the right “frame” from which to assess the proposal.

All of which motivated me to look at urban design in greater detail. Living in Toronto, it was natural to reread Jane Jacobs' *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Vintage, 1961). Little more than a decade

after Jacobs' book was published, Christopher Alexander published his original series of books on Pattern Languages. Reacquainting myself with that body of work was a natural step—the systems people had already taken to heart the pattern language message.

I was increasingly drawn into an urban-design world view. In what follows, I highlight some of the key points along my path toward enlightenment.

## Community and Neighborhood

Too much of the discussion about community and neighborhood takes them as being nearly equivalent. I've come to see that there are important differences. A "neighborhood" is a physical place. The boundaries may be somewhat ill defined, but the neighborhood is rooted in a physical location. In the past, "community" may have been largely identified with "neighborhood," but that's no longer true.

Serious urban-design mistakes happen when we don't keep separate our understanding of community and neighborhood. My view is that a community consists of people with shared values. The strength of the community depends on the nature and strength of those shared values. On the other hand, neighborhoods consist of people with shared practices. Or more precisely, a successful neighborhood is composed of people with sufficient shared practices that they can live together harmoniously.

## Built Form and Space

One of our local concerns is with the preservation of Toronto's 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial heritage. The last, best example is just outside my window along Yonge Street. Many 19<sup>th</sup>-century commercial buildings remain, albeit with sometimes grossly inappropriate modern signage. An inexpensive way of "preserving" that heritage is to keep the storefronts as facades on new, larger buildings. A faint echo from the past is preserved. Unfortunately, the resulting structures are not harmonious—they lack Alexander's quality that has no name.

I've come to see that the problem lies in not recognizing that the space within which built forms are experienced is a critical factor in what we experience. Radically alter the space and the experience is radically altered. That's exactly what happens when an historic front is pasted on a new large building. The

experience is "wrong," with the visual image inappropriate for the space in which it is experienced.

## Place and Placelessness

Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (Pion, 1976, 2008) provided an early and important distinction between locations that are "places" and those that lack a sense or spirit of place. As originally presented and originally read, Relph suggested that having a sense of place was "good" and not having that sense was "not good."

Subsequently, Relph did recognize that placelessness can confer a cloak of anonymity that many urban dwellers find attractive (see, for example, his new introduction to the 2008 reprint of *Place and Placelessness*). Such urban dwellers don't define themselves by where they live within the urban sphere. It's more a question of where they work and where they recreate. Their lived-in neighborhood doesn't need to contain places. That's certainly how many who live in vertical neighborhoods would seem to view their world.

Upon reflection, this lack of urban places seems to me ill advised. We should all seek an urban balance, with some healthy degree of urban anonymity and some healthy degree of the urban rootedness that recognizable neighborhood places can best provide.

## Top-Down and Bottom-Up

There is an attractiveness in the incremental, evolutionary, bottom-up urban design that Alexander described so well, for example, in *The Oregon Experiment* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1975). We do instinctively move toward the wholeness and completion that is found in built forms and spaces that have developed over time. Such places "work" on many different levels. If each separate development is small and developments are spread out over time, the bottom-up approach can make sense.

Today, however, many development increments are not small and many developers have no long-term view. The mega-project is alive and well, with many developments filling one or more city blocks. And developers, especially condominium developers, have a very short-term view of their buildings. The goal seems to be to finish the building, make sure all units are sold, and then get out. This process takes several

years but is almost always less than a decade—not exactly a long-term view. Under such conditions, the “quality that has no name” may never emerge. It’s important to have both a top-down vision and allow bottom-up creativity.

## Space Syntax

The name alone is appealing to someone who comes from the world of mathematics and computing. Bill Hillier’s work on space syntax is fascinating stuff—see, for example, his *Space is the Machine* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996). How the areas within an urban center connect is a revealing picture of how the people in those areas connect or can connect on a social and economic level.

For my purposes, however, much of the space-syntax work is at the urban-planning scale rather than urban design. Even so, I did extract an important insight from this way of thinking about urban space. Neighborhoods, especially open, heterogeneous neighborhoods, are significantly shaped by the number, nature, and kind of connections made possible by the built form and space. Indeed, the openness of a neighborhood requires that there be open, inviting connections from and to elsewhere.

## Phenomenology

I didn’t start out with a phenomenological view of the world. I grew to recognize the importance of context in properly framing our understanding. Very little that’s meaningful can be expressed in context-free terms. And the critical test of any context-sensitive understanding is the degree to which that understanding sheds light on individual, personal experience. In my case, my NIMBY reaction led to context-sensitive understanding about what Toronto should allow on “my” stretch of Yonge Street.

Preserving the form and space of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Yonge Street requires that no building, old or new, exceed a four-story height, at least not at lot line. Some reasonable step-back is required before new buildings can be erected. Our neighborhood association advocates a 30-meter step-back. My sense is that the required step-back should be related to the height of the new, taller, proposed building. Actual proposals are for 60-plus-story buildings with step-backs of five meters. This arrangement would destroy any real sense of our 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial heritage.

Next, Yonge Street is the central north-south pedestrian corridor in downtown Toronto. It’s currently effective but not always appealing. It’s also very attractive for condominium developers. There are over a dozen condominium development proposals, all within a few blocks of where I live. We should be able to turn this stretch of Yonge Street into a great, world-class street as Alan Jacobs describes such a possibility in *Great Streets* (MIT Press, 1995). The elements are present and development dollars could be channeled into the project. Setting a “great Yonge Street” Goal may have enough political traction to actually change the shape of development.

I’ve come some distance from my initial NIMBY reaction. I don’t know if the approach I’m following should be called phenomenology. I do recognize that any insight, necessarily context-sensitive, must be tested against personal experience. The insight and the experience are indissolubly connected—one without the other is a pale, shallow thing. Am I like the Moliere character who has been speaking phenomenology but never knew it?

One last note. In case there is any doubt, I have only taken the first small steps towards urban-design enlightenment. It’s been an interesting experience even though I’m far from enlightened!



# Between Heaven and Earth

## Christian Norberg-Schulz's Contribution to the Phenomenology of Place and Architecture

Akkelies van Nes

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Architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz' *Intentions in Architecture* (Norberg-Schulz 1967) is his most internationally known publication. Unfortunately only published in Norwegian, his 1971 *Mellom himmel og jord*—*Between Heaven and Earth*—is a continuation of *Intentions* and extends discussion of philosopher Martin Heidegger's "Building Dwelling Thinking" (Heidegger 1971).

*Between Heaven and Earth* is important because it presents the core of Norberg-Schulz' work on place and architectural phenomenology. Drawing on examples from Norwegian, Italian, and North African places, the Norwegian text provides an inspiring source to extend Norberg-Schulz's understanding of place and architecture. In this commentary, I draw on my place experiences in Norway and the Netherlands to reflect upon this book.

### The Meaning of Dwelling

One of Norberg-Schulz's key themes in *Between Heaven and Earth* is the question of what it means to be at home and bonded emotionally to particular places. He refers to a short story by the Norwegian writer Tarjei Vesaas entitled "*Sistemann heim*"—"The Last One Home"—in which the author describes the feelings for home of a young forester named Knut, who is in the woods felling timber.

One day Knut ponders what it means to belong to and know a particular place. For him, that place

is the forest, and he remains there at the end of one working day, confirming his identity with the place. He feels how the *sphere* of the forest changes. He observes how the darkness leaks from the *ground*, from the *sky*, and from the *horizon*. The forest *encloses* Knut through the dawn. Norberg-Schulz explains how Knut's place is revealed to him in this intense experience and illustrates a connection to a specific place that gives life meaning.

Vesaas does not describe a particular wooded place in his text. All the reader knows is that the place is a typical Norwegian pine forest. Vesaas writes:

*Sjå med mørknet lek fram or skogbotnen, or himmelen, fra synsrande. Han er fanga inn her.*

See how the dawn leaks on the forest *ground*, in *heaven*, from the *panoptical view*. He is captured inside it.

Norberg-Schulz applies the concepts *skogbotnen* (the forest ground), *himmelen* (the sky), and *synsrande* (the optical array or panoptical view) as basic elements for describing places at any environmental scale. All places, whether natural or built, typically have a ground or a floor; a ceiling, roof, or sky; and walls, trees, hills or other material forms shaping various types of optical arrays.

To dwell is an essential feature of human beings in that dwelling establishes a meaningful relationship between people and environment. Norberg-Schulz claims that, through place identification, we

give our life a presence and identity. In this sense, dwelling requires something from both our places and also from human beings.

Norberg-Schulz emphasizes that we must have an open mind and that places must evoke many possibilities for identification: “Today, many places offer poor qualities for identification, and people are not always open to or aware of their surroundings.” Norberg-Schulz speaks of an environmental crisis (*Umweltkrise*) in the way that the relationship between humans and place identity has been lost.

Norberg-Schulz points out that social science has so far been largely unhelpful in developing a qualitative concept of place. He finds more hopeful possibilities in art and architectural history, poetry and literature, and the writings of phenomenologists like Gaston Bachelard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Otto Bollnow, and Martin Heidegger.

## Features of Place

Human identity conditions place identity. To understand place identity, Norberg-Schulz singles out concrete features of place, drawing on the concepts of *Jord*, *himmel*, and *synsrand*—the Earth, sky, and optical array. In other words, place identity first involves what we walk on, what is above, and what we are aware of around us. Each aspect contributes to how one experiences a place [1].

Thus, the Earth reaches out and rises toward heaven, a situation that expresses a qualitative difference between “up” and “down.” To describe the “character” of a place is to consider how Earth, sky, and the optical array uniquely interact. Norberg-Schulz contends that the interaction among extension, degree of verticality, and boundaries plays a central role in shaping the lived aspects of a place. For example, the optical array is the horizon—the outer limits of a place. Similarly, objects and openings in the landscape can relate to the sky and bring heaven down to earth in different ways.

To dwell, therefore, means to respect a place with all its constitutional elements and qualities. Sand is an important place element for desert dwellers just as snow is important for Scandinavians or water for the Dutch. Norberg-Schulz’ main point is that, to protect place, one must be open to its identity. A phenomenological approach means that dwell-

ers and builders must take into account a place’s qualitative, mostly unmeasurable, aspects.

## Norwegian and Dutch Examples

How can this notion of place identity be understood more precisely? Norberg-Schulz’s first example is the Norwegian forest, which, he says, has wide topographic variations. One has no overview in this forest. Because of stones, bushes, moss roots, and an irregular topography, the forest floor is not uniform but diverse. “Heaven” in this forest is glimpses of the sky between trees. The optical array is mostly forest and hills. Sometimes, the optical array dramatically shifts because of mountains, water, or open spaces like meadows. Likewise, water elements such as streams and lakes contribute to changing topography and shifting light qualities.



Norwegian Pine Forest



Traditional Norwegian Settlement





Traditional Norwegian Interior

Norberg-Schulz draws on his forest description to consider how Norwegians dwell. Norway has no urban tradition. The Norwegian dream is to live behind each hill or to live alone along river or lake. The house represents a “cave of trees.” The traditional Norwegian settlement is arranged around an open space (“*tun*”) that contrasts with the dense, pine forest beyond. Since winters are long and summers are short, Norwegians bring the nature of summer inside and incorporate strong, warm colors in red, yellow, blue, green, and brown, often coupled with flower motifs. White is seldom used.



Dutch Polder Landscape

I would argue that, in a similar way, the traditional Dutch lifeworld is best depicted by Dutch painters. The endless horizontal line of a flat, wetland landscape is always present in the landscape paintings of Salomon and Jacob van Ruisdael, Jan van Goyen, Meindert Hobbema, and Rembrandt van Rijn. The sky takes up a large part in these land-

scapes paintings. Mostly, it consists of the clouds associated with unstable, windy weather.

In contrast with the wet, low landscape, settlements and built structures like farmhouses are located in higher, drier places sheltered by trees or other vegetation. These structures break up the landscape’s flat monotone. No surprises exist behind trees or hills. The heaven consists of clouds. Rows of trees have a regular rhythm rising up to heaven, while canals highlight the polder landscape’s horizontal extension.

How do the Dutch dwell traditionally? An English saying explains that “God created the World but the Dutch created Holland.” In contrast with Norway, the Netherlands has a long urban tradition incorporating water and other natural features. While traditional Norwegians might have preferred to live in a more isolated way, the Dutch have traditionally clustered in small, dense towns. In contrast with the monotony of the open polder landscape, every turn in a Dutch town offers some surprise.



Brick-and-Stone Buildings in a Dutch Town

The photograph above illustrates the brick-and-stone buildings in Delft. Water is an important element, and many Dutch prefer to have their homes adjacent to a canal. The buildings with their openings have a vertical orientation in contrast to the flat, open natural landscape. The traditional Dutch interior tends to include off-white or blue-white colored tiles, white walls, and wooden floors or tiles in dark colors.

Norberg-Schulz claims that, to be rooted existentially, human beings must open themselves to the particular typology of their surroundings. One must live with the “place spirit”—the *genius loci*—which,

in part, is determined by the *things* of a place. Buildings are things, and particularly important is the house, which not only satisfies material needs but also assembles a particular human world. First and foremost, buildings should mirror *genius loci*, and a house should contribute to its inhabitants' sense of orientation and identity.

To build is to interpret the spatial structure and character of a particular place. Like Heidegger, Norberg-Schulz aims to develop a poetic, creative relationship with reality. Nature is not a resource but, rather, reveals how human beings might best exist in the particular place in which they find themselves.



Traditional Dutch Interior

## Place Structure

In speaking of a built environment's structure at various scales, Norberg-Schulz refers to the organizational pattern of buildings in relationship to the surrounding landscape, the composite form of built elements, and interior organization. He points out that, typically, a settlement and its built parts are visible as clearly defined units in the landscape.

This formal clarity contributes to the settlement's being perceived as a *thing* for human beings. Neighborhoods and cities should have defined edges. Primary urban spaces appear as strong physical gestalts through their form and size. When urban squares and streets become too wide or too amorphous, human scale tends to get lost. Norberg-Schulz relates urban space with continuous borders to Gestalt psychology's continuity principle; thus,

free-standing buildings separated by too much distance are unable to contribute to viable squares and streets. In this sense, the removal of one strategically placed building can destroy an urban square's vitality.

In regard to dwellings, Norberg-Schulz emphasizes horizontal and vertical relations as they express a particular mode of connection between heaven and earth—how roof form, for example, contributes to a silhouette related more toward the sky or more toward the horizon and surrounding landscape. He discusses how contrasting roof shapes can play a significant role in distinguishing one place from another.

Similarly, interior qualities can be described through geometrical forms and relationships. A centrally-planned room may seem sky-related, while an axially-oriented room may relate more to horizontality and to the Earth. Yet again, an oval-shaped room may integrate central and axial qualities so that the space seems anchored and extended simultaneously.

## Place Character

Perhaps the strongest aspect of Norberg-Schulz's work is his explication of how physical and spatial elements shape and strengthen place character, which, he contends, is influenced by many environmental dimensions, including qualities of light and the composition and colors of terrestrial surfaces. Likewise, horizontal and vertical rhythms in architecture and landscape play an important role in how a settlement is experienced as a place.

Norberg-Schulz claims that, partly, a settlement becomes a place when it either contrasts with or complements the surrounding landscape. In this sense, a traditional Norwegian settlement adjusts itself to the natural context, whereas a Dutch settlement's verticality opposes the horizontality of natural landscape.

Similarly, urban character is dependent on environmental borders and surfaces. An urban space has floors and walls, while its "roof" relates to the changing sky, the experience of which can be modulated by towers, cornices, roof lines, and similar built features. Particular local paving materials and their sizing and layout contribute to the place's

experience of natural floor. Similarly, wall qualities like materials, color, and number and manner of openings all speak to lived qualities like the architectural degree of openness or closure; or a building's sense of movement or rest (Thiis-Evensen 1987).

A building's walls are particularly significant because they are the major architectural element marking private and public space. The wall is the "face" of the building where private and public worlds typically meet. Norberg-Schulz points out that inner and outer "forces" meet in the wall—it is there that architecture takes place.



Typical Oslo Windows



Typical Delft Windows

Norberg-Schulz gives particular attention to the wall's doors and windows, which he says play a central role in defining a building's inside-outside relationship (Thiis-Evensen 1987, 251-98). The size and shape of windows define a wall's degree of openness, continuity, degree of massiveness or lightness, and rhythm. He depicts windows as the "eyes of a place." For example, windows in Oslo's older buildings regularly have a T-shaped cross-piece pattern. In the Netherlands, older windows often consist of a white frame, with an inner frame colored in dark red, blue, or green; sometimes upper parts incorporate stained glass in warm colors.

A room's atmosphere is an integrated part of human being-in-the-world. While urban space expresses the character of locality broadly, any interior offers some partial variant on that character. An interior's ambience relates to open and closed rooms, which have much to do with whether the interior connects to or is separate from the outside. This inside-outside relationship also relates to windows, including their size, shape, and placement. How much light they offer the interior is one of the most important aspects of the ambience of inside.

Norberg-Schulz emphasizes that the interior works as a place for human beings only when our home sustains our world. In this way, we *dwelt*. This dwelling relationship is more obvious in traditional cultures, where necessarily there existed a meaningful relation between larger and smaller scales and between inside and outside.

## Weaknesses

Though Norberg-Schulz's findings in describing place *character* are well argued, he is less successful in dealing with place *structure* in that he regularly conflates normative and descriptive concerns. His use of Gestalt psychology contributes to his prejudice for ordered, harmonious, and beautiful places that are smaller-scaled, clearly delineated, and formalistically distinctive. What, however, of environmental and architectural meanings related to a place's cultural and social dimensions? A clear understanding of how particular individuals and groups experience and understand place is largely lacking in *Between Heaven and Earth* and in Norberg-Schulz' other writings.



All understanding of place is a value-loaded interpretation and ultimately partial—one subjective reading of reality. Such interpretation is a combination of place *character* (contributing dimensions to what the phenomenon is), place *intentions* (presumed actions and aims in regard to the phenomenon), and place *meanings* (cultural and social sources and expressions). Norberg-Schulz's place interpretation largely focuses on place character and needs extension into the realms of place intentions and meanings, especially as situated in our complex postmodern world.

One can also argue that Norberg-Schulz largely ignores place *order* and *structure*. Clues to understanding order are offered by urban morphologists, who relate the spatial patterns of place to various socio-economic processes (Moudon 1997). These researchers focus, for example, on how planning law and property rules shape building patterns—a topic discussed nowhere in Norberg-Schulz's writings.

In their research on space syntax, Bill Hillier and colleagues (Hillier & Hanson 1984) have articulated clearly defined concepts of space and spatial relationships that point to less obvious spatial structures that play a central role in a place's relative degree of pedestrian life and informal street and sidewalk sociability. As Hillier (1996) has demonstrated, a built environment's spatial structure plays a role in pedestrian and vehicle flows as well as in the spatial distribution of shops and crime. An urban place with few pedestrians is typically experienced as dull, dangerous, empty, or silent, whereas a lively street with many pedestrians is experienced as safe, robust, and interesting. The key is a less obvious spatial *structure* that Hillier's work so effectively reveals but about which Norberg-Schulz was seemingly unaware.

Place *character*, place *structure*, and place *order* are shaped through social, economic, and political processes. In turn, these spatial properties have an impact on human feelings, attitudes, and actions. According to Norberg-Schulz, a phenomenological approach to place involves an understanding of local and cultural context. In particular, primary understanding in regard to architectural and environmental experience is grounded in concepts largely

derived from Gestalt psychology, including his emphasis on closed settlements with clear boundaries.

Research on the spatial properties of built environments can contribute normative principles for how design might facilitate more successful places, though what the result might mean for users' experiences is not easy to predict. For some users, design changes to place will be considered as an improvement, whereas for others, the same design changes may be seen as detrimental. "Place creators," including architects and planners, are condemned to face criticism from clients and users, partly because client and user preferences are sometimes misdirected and partly because they involve contrasting understandings as to what a satisfactory place might be "between heaven and earth."

## Note

1. Norberg-Schulz's doctoral student Thomas Thiis-Evensen would later interpret these three themes as *floor*, *wall*, and *roof*, which he called *archetypes* and used as the major organizational structure for his important phenomenology of architectural experience, *Archetypes in Architecture* (Thiis-Evensen 1987).

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# Seventh Letter from Far South

## The Gifts of Place

John Cameron

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*This essay is one of a series of “occasional letters” that retired environmental educator John Cameron will be writing from his home on Bruny Island, just off the southeastern coast of Tasmania, the island state to the south of mainland Australia. For earlier letters, see EAP, winter and fall 2008; spring 2009; winter and fall 2010; and spring 2011. [Jcameronvking@optusnet.com.au](mailto:Jcameronvking@optusnet.com.au) © 2012 John Cameron; images © 2012 Vicki King.*

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Recently, I was sitting at my desk when I looked up and saw the last light of a late winter day drenching Blackstone Bay, catching the top of the ripples on the jade water. Terns were swerving and plummeting down into the water for fish, an echidna waddled into view through the Prickly Moses bushes (*Acacia verticillata*).

What else could I do but stop, put down my pen, appreciate what I was seeing? I thought to myself, “I just feel so damn fortunate to be here at all. Just living here is a huge gift in itself.” I could call the experience an everyday matter, except that it is often accompanied by chagrin that I regularly forget it and get tied up in my own mental dramas.

I began thinking about gifts. In several of my “Blackstone” essays, I have used the word “gift,” usually in the sense of receiving something meaningful from this place where we live or from some creature here. A heron guided us here and continues to manifest the qualities of poised attentiveness to which I aspire [1]. The discovery of our first eagle feather immediately upon becoming custodians of the “sod hut” was a tangible token to us [2].

We’re learning about living within our ecological means, accepting limitations rather than chafing under them, appreciating what we are given each



day from the sun, wind, and rain [3]. Working to regenerate the land has given me a far more satisfying daily and yearly cycle of activity than I would have had otherwise. At the same time, planting thousands of native trees and maintaining them feel like an opportunity to give back to the land, a form of mutuality [4].

Does it make sense to describe these occurrences as gifts? Like many commonplace expressions, the word is worthy of further reflection. What do I mean, what is being given by whom or what? Is it merely a nice turn of phrase, or is it a useful idea that has value and meaning as a way of thinking

about places and how we inhabit them? To what extent does a theory of gifts shed light on these questions?

One lucid account of the dynamics of gift-giving and receiving is Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift* [5], which draws on the pioneering sociological work of Marcel Mauss to outline a theory of gifts that I would summarize as follows: The recipient of a gift either reciprocates or passes on an equivalent or related gift to another person who in turn passes on the gift.

In time, by a process that can involve a spiritual intermediary or has a mysterious quality to it, a gift returns to the giver, and it cycles around again. The gift increases with each turn of the circle, transforms the giver and the receiver, and is itself often transmuted.



The increase of the gifts occurs on different levels—physical, when the gifts are alive and multiply naturally; social, when the circulation of the gifts creates a community out of the individual expressions of goodwill that accompany the gift; and spiritual, when gifts are the agents of spirit that survives the consumption of the goods that are its embodiment.

Many of the examples Hyde uses to establish his theory come from the more-than-human world. He cites traditional Maori practices associated with hunting, for example. The forest gives birds to the hunters and, after returning from the forest, they give a portion of the kill to priests who cook the birds at a sacred fire. They prepare a talisman that is the physical embodiment of the forest spirit and return it to the forest. The ceremony the priests perform is called “feeding the spirit” and is aimed at increasing the abundance of forest birds. And so the circle continues with the bird flesh being transmuted at each step of the cycle.

The gift involves responsibilities and obligations on the part of the recipient. To receive is not a passive act. The gift must be reciprocated, or even better, passed on; it must be honored. North Pacific Native-American peoples traditionally welcomed the first salmon of the season and honored the fish as if it were the visiting chief of a neighboring tribe. The recipient is bound to the giver and undertakes what Hyde calls “the labor of gratitude.”

A transformative gift cannot be fully received when first offered because the person does not yet have the capacity to accept it wholly, understand it, and pass it along. There is work to be done to enable the transformation of the gift and recipient, and for the increase of the gift to continue around the circle. The gift that does not move loses its properties.

Hyde describes the whole gift cycle as characterized by *eros*, with qualities of relationship, bonding, imagination, synthesis, and interdependence. The opposite is a cycle based on *logos*, with qualities of market exchange, analytic thought, self-reflection, and logic. The interaction between these two polar forces is critical, and while Hyde contends that neither is more important or powerful than the other, he provides many examples of the

potential for the logic of the market to overwhelm erotic gift exchange.

Gift theory, like many sociological theories, has come in for its share of criticism [6]. Notable among the critics is Jacques Derrida, who regarded gift-giving as one of his key *aporias*, or insoluble paradoxes [7]. In his view, the implicit demand for recompense, the imposition it places on the receiver and the self-congratulation of the giver always compromises gift exchange.

Gifts may come with heavy psychic cost. The recipient may feel the weight of the unspoken demand to respond or to acknowledge the generosity of the giver, especially if there is suspicion the giver’s primary motivation was to receive thanks. Yet in the case of gifts from place, there is no human giver to become egocentrically entangled, and what Derrida regards as an imposition is transformed in Hyde’s work to an acceptance of responsibility and an avenue to deeper engagement with place.

The possibility of the receiver becoming egocentrically entangled remains, however. It is a short step from feeling gratitude for what a place has given to feeling somehow special for having received these gifts. Or, more subtly, for having the sensitivity to recognize such occurrences as gifts. There is a fine line between drawing attention to the place itself and what can occur within it, and drawing attention to oneself: “Look at me; look at what I’ve been given.”

Bearing this critique in mind, I do think that the theory of gift exchange is a useful way of looking more deeply at what has been happening for us on Bruny. I was struck immediately by the term “the labor of gratitude.” I am indeed grateful for the gifts I feel I have received at Blackstone, but according to Hyde, feeling gratitude is insufficient and only the start of the matter. Do I have the sense that I do not yet have the capacity to accept these gifts wholly, understand them, and pass them along? Indeed I do, for I often find myself struggling with what the mirror of Nature reveals to me, with feeling that I am out of my depth, feeling that what I’m giving back to this place is meager in comparison with what I’ve been given.

In Hyde’s view, there is nothing wrong with this sense of doubt—it is in fact an integral stage of the labor of gratitude. Some aspect of our self is able to ap-

prehend the gift, but it is not yet ours. The sense of indebtedness drives us forward to allow the transformative gift to work within us until we have made it wholly ours and pass it along, at which point the labor of gratitude is complete.

To be able to accept a gift, one has first to recognize it as such. I've described several gifts from Blackstone, but how many others have I missed? In my experience, this part of the labor is as much about relinquishing barriers to attention and being present as it is about developing new capabilities. One winter's day recently, I came down from the fields and only remembered after the event that Forest Ravens (*Corvus tasmanicus*) were making a ruckus in the trees above me. I was so preoccupied with my mental tussle with the neighboring grazier that I failed to perceive the gift that perhaps the ravens were making available.

What does it take to fully accept a gift from the more-than-human world once it is recognized as such? As well as the obligation to keep the gift moving, there is the acceptance of the limitations that may come with the gift. In the example of the sun, wind, and rain, the limitations are quite physical in our case—the day only provides so much sun for our solar panels—but part of the labor of gratitude is surely to be satisfied with what is given, to recognize that it is enough, abundantly enough, and adjust our activities accordingly. A further aspect is acceptance of the responsibilities and commitments that come with the gift. When we bought the adjoining 20 acres of land to Blackstone, we took on custodianship of a significant intercultural heritage site.

A large element of the ongoing labor of gratitude has been overcoming my resistance to the inherent process, which has taken many forms. There are days when I see the stillness of the waters or the poise of the heron as more of a mute reproach than a gift, a silent pointing out of my mental turbulence and lack of grace. When our solar panels failed to deliver the promised amount of power over our first winter, my overblown sense of technical incompetence blinded me to the real situation and what needed to be done.

Also, I didn't immediately accept that what the place was offering me was meaningful physical work and supportive structure for my life. Instead, I

grumbled that this wasn't what I had come here for, becoming prickly and overwhelmed at the fields of bristling thistles and the legions of insects eating the native trees we planted. The labor of gratitude has meant not accepting self-imposed limitations of what I was capable of and not succumbing to feelings of self-pity and inadequacy. Or, at least, to hold these things a little more lightly.

We have increasingly participated in passing on Blackstone's gifts. As well as sun, wind, and rain, we have been given metaphors and symbols, meaning and structure, and we have reciprocated by making a start in restoring the land, providing sanctuary for wildlife, and protecting the heritage site. In response to what we have learned here, we have also put energy into combating the degradation of nearby land through the Killora Coastcare group. Several years ago I was part of a group that formed the Bruny Island Environment Network (BIEN), for which I am Deputy Convenor and involved in many environmental activities on the island. This responsibility, in turn, has fed back to the land in physical ways, with BIEN and Coastcare tree-planting days on Blackstone and, less tangibly, in friends and community members telling us of the pleasure and inspiration they gain in seeing our young trees growing well when they drive past our land.

At another level, we have both been moved to express to others what has occurred here and what we have received. Vicki has produced remarkable paintings, bird sculptures, and illustrated poetry inspired by Blackstone, the first two of which are new forms of expression for her since coming to Bruny. In my place essays, I have appreciated the opportunity to tell the stories of some of our joys and lessons learned at Blackstone to an international readership, and to reflect further on our experiences.

The participation of the creative artist in the gift economy is the main subject of Lewis Hyde's book. He has much to say about a poet or artist's ability being a gift and the necessity to pass it on through expression, but I will content myself with one quotation:

Works of art are drawn from, and their bestowal nourishes, those parts of our being that are not entirely personal, parts that derive from Nature, from the group and the race, from history and religion, and from the spiritual world [8].

I emphasize Hyde's point here that works of art *are drawn from* and *nourish* these domains of the transpersonal world. Within this reciprocity between giving and receiving is the key feature of the transformative gift's circulation.

I can see this dynamic most clearly at play in Vicki's Blackstone works. They derive from that part of her being that is intertwined with Nature, especially the birds, from her processing of her past as well as the intercultural history of this place and being witness to the negative effect of 200 years of settlement on wildlife and the Nuenone people. Her work nourishes that larger part of me that trembles in front of her "Angel of History" (right) painted from natural pigments she makes from this land [9]. The angel's huge wings are outspread and her knees are buckling from the pain of what she has witnessed. Then there is her series of Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus funereus*) paintings, wings spread in benediction or warning, both bird and angel, as well as being a totem and a harbinger of death for the Nuenone. I know that others who have seen her work have been equally moved, troubled, and nourished.

My essays have become an integral part of my daily life, something that I both need and want to do. It is a way of making sense of what has happened here, of expressing first to myself and then to others how these relationships with the place and its inhabitants have deepened, a way of passing on the gift. A few readers have responded, returning the favor with feedback.

Sorrow has been one of the transformative qualities of the gifts we have received from Blackstone. Of course, we also experience much wild joy here—standing in our dressing gowns on the shore as two pods of dolphins leap clear of the water and click audibly to each other as



they round up a school of fish. Watching mating sea eagles fly wing tip to wing tip in descending spirals before leveling out above the water and gliding away together. But for me, perhaps because of my proclivity for sweetness and light, accepting sorrowful aspects of Blackstone's past and its prospects has had the greater impact.

Rediscovering the "sod hut" and our rapid immersion into early Bruny Island history gave the story of the Nuenone people greater poignancy and immediacy. Recall that Truganini witnessed her mother being stabbed to death, her uncle was shot by a soldier, her sister was carried off by sealers, timber-getters killed

her husband-to-be then repeatedly raped her, and this was before she went with George Augustus Robinson only to find herself and her people exiled on Flinders Island [10].

We couldn't avoid the comparison with the fate of the local flora and fauna—North Bruny Island was extensively cleared and wildlife shot. It was the slaughter of wallabies on our land by a local grazier that precipitated our efforts to create a sanctuary for wildlife on Blackstone. Vicki particularly could not escape the feeling of melancholy that seemed to permeate the land, but as we learned about past and present history, we understood that feeling more. Now, possibly as a result of our work, one of our Aboriginal friends said to us recently that "the land here is quieter now."

We feel especially fortunate in having *Xanthorrhoea* grasstrees scattered through the open woodland and especially saddened by the fact that a few of those close to our house are dying from *Phytophthora* root rot [11]. The intimacy I have felt as a result of doing intensive Goethean science studies with the grasstrees only compounds the sorrow. The knowledge that the rot can be spread by almost any human activity (such as our bringing in a contractor who may have brought *Phytophthora* in on his tractor tires) makes it even worse. In addition to the outer work of periodically spraying the grasstrees

with dilute fungicide and avoiding the area when it is wet, there's inner work to do as well—to be equally open to the appreciation of the gift of their presence and to the sorrow of their decline at human hands, including unwittingly by our own.

One other reason that some of the *Xanthorhea* are dying back may be that over the past two decades, North Bruny has been steadily drying out. Two of the six years we have been here have been the driest in the last 100 years. The predictions from climatologists are clear—this part of the world will be much hotter and drier in coming decades.

One of the consequences of living in a place like Blackstone is that these generalizations become much more immediate and specific. One of the iconic birds of Bruny is the endangered Forty-spotted Pardalote (*Pardalotus quadragintus*), and we are fortunate to have several on our land. One day, to our delight, two of them alighted on the railing of our veranda close enough to count the spots on their wings.

Yet, sadly, Forty-spots on the island are declining. In 1995, the Bruny population was 1,920, the largest population of Forty-spots anywhere. In the census last year, there were only 450 [12]. The primary reason is dieback of white gums, *Eucalyptus viminalis*, their only food source, because of reduced rainfall. We are busy planting and maintaining white gums on our land to give Forty-spots the best chance, but they may become extinct as climate change worsens. This prospect brings a particular sorrow with it, and gives added impetus to my work with BIEN in coordinating a Bruny Island response to climate change.

Lewis Hyde's description of a gift passing into the realm of mystery before circling back in a transformed fashion to the giver resonates with our experiences here. There were a string of coincidences, unlikely events, and a heron that led to our being here in the first place. There were some uncanny aspects to our becoming custodians of the sod hut land, culminating in the appearance of the eagle feather.

It is only a subjective feeling that the sense of melancholy pervading this land has lifted, but to

have others confirm that the land is quieter now could be seen as the gift returning to the land in a renewed form. Whether or how this shift has occurred involves a mysterious element that I'm more inclined to accept as part of our experience of being here rather than seek to dismiss or explain it in other ways.

The matter of explanation raises the issue of the relationship between the *eros* of the gift cycle and the *logos* of market exchange and analytic thought. It is clear to me that both forces are at work in our daily lives and, at a broader level, that the logic of the market and the relentless privatization of what used to be public goods are making it harder for the gift cycle to work its magic.

On the positive side, although Hyde downplays the possibility of synergy between the two forces, I have found that Goethean science offers a way of bringing together intuitive imagination and rational analytical thought. Investigating the mushroom rocks and the sea-green line along our shore using Goethe's approach required me to apply my knowledge of geological history, interpretation of the rock forms, and what Goethe called *bildung*, the schooling of the intuitive faculties [13]. It has led me to a deeper appreciation and connection with these formations than I could have had with either of these ways of thinking alone.

I wonder whether there is a warning in Hyde's injunction that the gift can be lost in excessive self-consciousness. To measure, reckon value, or seek the cause of a thing is to cease being in tune with the flow of the gift; the singer must not become too self-conscious of her singing. In my writing, I must be careful to honor the gift and not stray too far into the territory of causes and explanations.

What of the critiques of gift theory? In the case of the self-congratulation of the recipient, it is notoriously difficult to see one's own blind spots. In some place writing, it is possible to discern when the author crosses a line so that the work is no longer in the service of the place and its gifts but, instead, becomes a subtle kind of self-aggrandizement. Though my essays are replete with mistakes I've made at Blackstone, I also know I can fall prey to wanting to appear sensitive and humble to readers and visitors, so the criticism is justified [14].

There are several other possible objections to what I've been saying. The skeptic might say that I haven't been given anything at all. The heron was simply doing what herons do, keeping well away from prying humans in boats. The eagle merely lost a feather in flight over the sod hut. The rest is coincidence. Everything is simply following physical and biological laws, chance, and coincidence. Any notion of a gift is a fanciful construction.

Indeed, the heron and the eagle *were* doing what they do.

I'm not at all attributing supernatural agency to them or to the place as a whole. The phenomena occurred as I described them, and it is all a matter of one's interpretation and understanding.

But worldviews have consequences for action. With Maori hunters and the forest birds, with Northwestern tribal peoples and the salmon, moral guidance on how to act as a good hunter or fisher are as much a part of the culture as the increase ceremonies. As far as we know, the tribes and their salmon flourished for millennia. It didn't take long for Europeans with a different worldview—one that didn't include respect for totem salmon—to eliminate 214 races of the fish from rivers and tributaries on the Pacific Coast of the United States alone [15].

**I**t could be argued that the differences between the traditional land-based cultures that Hyde draws upon for his gift theory and modern Western culture, within which the gifts of Blackstone are being exchanged, are too great to enable any useful lessons to be drawn. Surely it is possible, though, to acknowledge the extent of cultural difference and the impossibility of adopting another culture's lifestyle while also embracing a different worldview and seeking to apply it within one's own cultural context. Hyde is painfully aware of the gulf between the cultures, yet successfully draws meaningful and practical lessons for the contemporary creative artist. Freeman House writes in his exemplary *Totem Salmon* about attempts to regenerate



wild salmon habitat in Northern California and describes Hyde's book as providing "priceless" guidance for his efforts [16].

In our case at Blackstone, accepting the worldview of the gift has assuredly had beneficial consequences. Without it, we might not have felt the need to return the gift and plant thousands of endemic trees. We might have left the agisted sheep to their own devices or put our feet up on the veranda and let the auction next door proceed without trying to save the sod hut site. We would have had less to pass on to others and a smaller role in the

Bruny Island community. Without the impetus of the labor of gratitude, I might have been less receptive to the life lessons from other species. I might have been less responsive to the true abundance I am surrounded by, and I would probably be leading a less rewarding life here. Clearly, we, and the place, would be the poorer.

A more subtle objection could be made that it is too simplistic to talk of a gift from a place to its human inhabitants because the two are more complexly intertwined than that. From a phenomenological point of view, in David Seamon's words, "any talk of a people-environment relationship is intellectually artificial; existentially people are inextricably immersed and enmeshed in their world" [17]. Jeff Malpas elaborates this point in his *Place and Experience*, where he points out that it is the complex structure of place itself that makes experience, *any* experience possible at all [18]. This presumably includes the experience of receiving gifts from places.

But inextricability doesn't necessarily mean that it isn't meaningful to talk of gift exchange between person and place. In a recent talk, Malpas described one of the meanings of place as being a matrix within which there is a continuous flux of being/becoming [19]. From this point of view, *all* events in which one is involved could be described as gifts of place. Perhaps another way to express it would be to say that the sense of receiving gifts from a place is an emergent property and something that arises from the interplay of narrative,



agency, intersubjectivity, and a sense of identity—all within the matrix of place.

What I'm trying to think through is how these broader ideas find expression in a place like Blackstone that has a very specific structure and history within which I, with my specific personal history and makeup, perceive certain events as gifts. To give a small instance, because of what I've experienced on the land and what eagles symbolize to me, I stop whatever I am doing whenever a wedge-tail or sea eagle appears, and I watch in wonder. I don't do the same for ravens, so it is no wonder that eagles figure much more prominently in my catalogue of gifts from Blackstone than ravens.

As long as one doesn't take the sense of gift too literally, become too egocentrically entangled with it, or assign supernatural agency to a place or its inhabitants, I believe the notion of gift exchange with place nicely complements philosophies of place. It provides a way to bring large ideas to life through promoting key attitudes and dispositions. What better way to develop reciprocity with the more-than-human world that David Abram espouses, for example, than to consider ourselves in gift exchange with the places in which we live and work? [20]

Speaking of the gifts of Blackstone is not merely a rhetorical flourish. It is expressive of how we view the place, how we act, and who we are. Hyde's work on the gift has enabled me to see that I am engaged in a labor of gratitude involving long-term processes of deepening receptivity, greater acceptance of responsibility to keep the gift circulating, and the willingness to enter its transformative and ultimately mysterious domains.

I have endeavored to heed his warning not to stray into explanations and causation, yet to put it into the broader context of philosophies of place and to suggest its significance. And I hope that in some small way the spirit of what we have been given at Blackstone will be passed on to the reader.

## Notes

1. See my First Letter from Far South (*EAP*, 19, 1) for a description of the heron's pivotal role. Letters are available at:

[www.krex.k-state.edu/dspace/handle/2097/1522](http://www.krex.k-state.edu/dspace/handle/2097/1522).

2. In my Second Letter from Far South (*EAP*, 19, 3), I relate the series of uncanny events that led to our becoming the owners of 20 acres of adjoining land that contains a site of important intercultural historical significance.
3. See my Fourth Letter from Far South (*EAP*, 21, 1) for the story of how I came to understand that the more one accepts these gifts, and the limitations that come with them, the more a sense of the abundance of life emerges.
4. In my Sixth Letter from Far South (*EAP*, 22, 2), I describe how our attempts to provide sanctuary for wildlife on our land have transformed our lives here.
5. L. Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (Vintage, 1999).
6. I would like to acknowledge conversations on this topic with Lucy Tatman, Jean Curthoys, and my partner Vicki King.
7. Derrida wrote two books on this subject: *Given Time* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992); and *The Gift of Death* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995).
8. Hyde, op. cit., p. 152.
9. The title is a reference to Walter Benjamin's 1940 Theses on the Philosophy of History (IX), published in *Illuminations*, H. Arendt, ed. (Fontana Press, 1992), p. 249.
10. As described in my Third Letter from Far South (*EAP*, 20, 2).
11. Grass trees are particularly susceptible to *Phytophthora* root rot that can be spread by almost any human activity—see my Fifth Letter from Far South (*EAP*, 21, 3).
12. S. Bryant & C. Tzaros, A Forty-Spot of Trouble, *Wingspan*, 20, 2 (2010).
13. Especially using the method propounded by Isis Brook; see my Second Letter from Far South (*EAP*, 19, 3).
14. I am also fortunate that Vicki is well-attuned to self-delusion and false humility in her partner.
15. F. House, *Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species* (Beacon Press, 1999), p. 19.
16. House, op.cit., particularly page 114.
17. D. Seamon, A Way of Seeing People and Place. In S. Wapner et al., eds, *Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research*, pp. 157-78 (Plenum, 2000).
18. J. Malpas, *Place and Experience: a Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
19. Malpas presented a talk, "The Complexities of Place: From the Urban to the Wild," to the forum, Living, Creating, Thinking in Place, May 7, 2010, School of Geography and Environmental Studies, Univ. of Tasmania, Hobart.
20. D. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (Vintage, 1997).

Accompanying images are by artist and poet **Vicki King**, John Cameron's life partner. Her poetry and art were featured in the spring 2010 issue of *EAP*; her work has also accompanied a number of Cameron's "letters from Far South." Images: p. 1, "Before the Storm"; p. 13, "Two Shorebirds"; p. 16, "Angel of History"; p. 18, "Black Cockatoo Painting 2." King created the shorebird sculptures out of local drift wood from Blackstone Bay.

# Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology

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## Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology

Published three times a year, **EAP** is a forum and clearing house for research and design that incorporate a qualitative approach to environmental and architectural experience.

One key concern of **EAP** is design, education, and policy supporting and enhancing natural and built environments that are beautiful, alive, and humane. Realizing that a clear conceptual stance is integral to informed research and design, the editors emphasize phenomenological approaches but also cover other styles of qualitative research.

### Exemplary themes

- Sense of place;
- Architectural and landscape meaning;
- Changing conceptions of space, place, and nature;
- Home, dwelling, and journey;
- The nature of environmental and architectural experience;
- Environmental design as place making;
- The practice of a *lived* environmental ethic.

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