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As readers know, 2009 marks *EAP*'s 20th year. To celebrate this benchmark, we are planning a special fall issue that includes essays by some major figures in "place research."

This issue of *EAP* includes three feature essays. First, Architecture doctoral student Reza Shirazi examines the strengths and weaknesses of Finnish architectural phenomenologist Juhani Pallasmaa's "fragile phenomenology." Next, Architecture master's student Christopher Chamberlin considers philosopher Martin Heidegger's understanding of thinking and building and their connection to what Chamberlin calls an "originary dwelling." Last, environmental educator John Cameron forwards the third of his "letters" from Bruny Island, Tasmania, this time relating an intriguing personal story that says much about commitment to local place.

EAP Conference Sessions

On 27 May, there will be an EAP-Building Process Alliance co-sponsored all-day intensive on architect Christopher Alexander at the annual meeting of the **Environmental Design Research Association** (EDRA), in Kansas City, Missouri. Participants include architects Susan Ingham, Tom Kubala, Michael Mehaffy, Kyriakos Pontikis, and Yodan Rofè; landscape architect Jesus Lara; and anthropologist Jenny Quillien. <http://www.edra.org/>.

Philosopher Ingrid Stefanovic and *EAP* editor David Seamon are organizing a special Monday-morning EAP session (Nov. 2) for the annual meeting of the **International Association for Environmental Philosophy** (IAEP), to be held in Arlington, Virginia, 31 October-2 November, immediately following the annual meetings of **SPEP** (Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy) and **SPHS** (Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences). www.environmentalphilosophy.org.

Below: One theme in Ned Crankshaw's Creating Vibrant Public Spaces (see p. 3) is how, in towns and small cities, parking plays an important role in pedestrian experience. He notes that some commercial districts—e.g., Prescott, Arizona, below—have "systems of access that function for the entire sequence of experience. In these towns, parking is accessible and conveniently located, the walking experience is a cohesive spatial sequence, and the historic building pattern is intact."

In the case of Prescott, the downtown is centered on the courthouse square, and "the building pattern in the commercial blocks around the square is uninterrupted and contributes to an optimal visual and pedestrian environment, yet parking is conveniently close." Of the four blocks around the square, "three have no gaps in the line of building facades. Parking has not intruded into the building pattern. Every storefront is occupied, just as in the rest of the downtown. Visitors to Prescott will inevitably walk into the square and realize that it is the downtown's heart—but with a tree canopy that makes it a place apart from the streets" (p. 129 & 130).



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We are grateful to the following readers who, since the last issue, have contributed more than the base subscription for 2009.

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Items of Interest

The International Association for Cultural Studies in Architecture (IACSA) has published its first newsletter; entries include discussion of “ways of walking in the built environment.” IACSA was “founded in Zurich in September 2008 by a group of cultural researchers, ethnologists, architects, historians, and geographers. Its Founding Advisors’ Board consists of representatives from six European countries and represents six disciplines relevant for cultural empirical-phenomenological inquiries in issues of built space. IACSA begins as a ‘slow science’ initiative and offers free membership with an electronic newsletter.” iacsa@mobileculturestudies.com.

Children, Youth and Environments (CYE) is a peer-reviewed on-line journal focusing on sustainable environments for children and youth. The journal publishes papers “on a broad range of topics and using different approaches, including quantitative and qualitative empirical research, theoretical, methodological and historical investigations, critical literature reviews, design analyses, post-occupancy evaluations, policy studies, and program assessments.” www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/CYE_MissionBackground.htm#.

The **Nature Institute** in upstate New York will sponsor summer courses on Goethean science, including “Experiencing Wholeness in Nature,” to be held 21-27 June 2009. info@natureinstitute.org.

The 11th annual conference of the **Society for Phenomenology and Media (SPM)** was held in Washington, DC, 26-28 February. The focus of the group is how the media shape being-in-the-world and in-

teraction with others. The theme of this year’s conference was “the impact of the media on politics.” www.thesocietyforphenomenologyandmedia.org.

A symposium on **Theatre and Ecology** will be held 21-31 May, 2009, at the University of Oregon. The focus will be plays, workshops, panels, papers, installations, and so forth that involve “theatrical or performance responses to the environmental crisis in particular, and our ecological relationship in general.” Contact: Theresa May, Theater Arts, VIL 216, Univ. of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

Communicative Cities: Integrating Technology and Place is a conference to be held 25-26 June, 2009, in Columbus, Ohio. Papers will “encompass a variety of areas (design, public policy, journalism) across different scales and settings (downtowns, city/regional, global), and seek to address questions such as: What makes a communicative city? How do cities facilitate communication? How can technology and face-to-face communication be integrated in a global world? What are the challenges from the exponential rise in communication technology? What are the potential impacts on place and community? How can global connectivity and data accessibility be achieved?” www.tinyurl.com/6AHHVZ.

Citations Received

Leon Chartrand, 2008. *An Originative Perspective of Wildness and Its Implications for Dwelling in Nearness to Grizzly Bears in the Yellowstone: A Phenomenological Case for a Primordial Ethic*. Doctoral dissertation, Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto, 2008.

This biologist focuses on humans’ lived relationship with bears—specifically grizzly bears of Yellowstone. In a time when grizzlies have been removed from the endangered species list, how can we keep the world of the bear alive and well? Chartrand contends that a key danger is human/bear conflicts and the calculative manner in which science and wildlife policy attempt to mitigate that conflict, either by making the bear harmless or by finding ways to isolate it from humans. Chartrand argues against this calculative strategy and uses a phenomenological approach (largely grounded in Heidegger) to find some way to allow bears to be in our current and future world. He concludes we must deal with this conflict “in a truly originative way” by recovering “an affection for the bear’s revelatory power” that can arise from “our being open

to the bear as a ‘gathered presence’” and to our “giving ourselves over to the ‘mystery’ of that presence.”

Ned Crankshaw, 2008. *Creating Vibrant Public Spaces: Streetscape Design in Commercial and Historic Districts*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

This landscape architect writes: “Particularly thoughtful design is needed in downtowns because, as a human environment, they present great potential and great challenges. The viability of commercial districts is essential if communities are to offer a range of choices for living patterns. Design within them is restricted by existing spatial patterns in a way unlike few other environments. Most important is that downtowns collectively represent a vast underutilized infrastructure made up of thousands of commercial districts in towns, cities, and neighborhoods across North America.” See sidebar, right, and illustration on p. 1.

Thomas F. Gieryn, 2000. A Space for Place in Sociology, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26: 463-96.

“The point of this review is to indicate that sociologists have a stake in place no matter what they analyze, or how: The works cited below *emplace* inequality, difference, power, politics, interaction, community, social movements, deviance, crime, life course, science, identity, memory, history. After a prologue of definitions and methodological ruminations, I ask: How do places come to be the way they are, and how do places matter for social practices and historical change?”

Robert Mugerauer & Lynne Manzo, 2008. *Environmental Dilemmas: Ethical Decision Making*. NY: Lexington Books.

This book argues that “we not only must make careful individual decisions concerning the environment, but need to improve the way we operate socially, especially given the roles and responsibilities we have as environmental professionals, private-sector developers, public policy-makers and staff, or engaged citizens.” To assist resolution of environmental dilemmas, the authors “focus on the decision-making process. Their goal is to help readers become more aware of the world views, beliefs, and values that enter into... decisions... and to better resolve differences...” Several exercises and case studies are used “to investigate the choices and issues that different stakeholders face (for example, concerning sustainability).”

Eva-Maria Simms, 2008. *The Child in the World: Embodiment, Time, and Language in Early Childhood*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

This psychologist “draws on both psychological and phenomenological research to investigate child existence in its cultural and historical context and explore the ways children interact with the world around them. Simms examines key

experiences of childhood with special attention to the non-dualistic nature of the child’s consciousness and the understanding that there is more to the child’s experiences than cognitive processes. In chapters that proceed from infancy to early childhood, Simms considers how children live their embodiment, coexist with others, experience the spaces and places of their neighborhoods, have deeply-felt relations to things, grasp time intuitively and often in contradiction to adult clock-time, and are transformed by the mystery of the symbolic order of play and language.”

What downtowns in towns & small cities should do

- In many towns and small cities, the downtown is the one place where people walk, not only for exercise but as a form of transportation. A downtown should be a comfortable walking place.
- Most downtowns have lost their primacy as mass-market retail districts, so they need to be engaging places for the more specialized commercial activities that can thrive in them.
- Centralized historic commercial districts are often the only commercial areas with neighborhoods in walking distance, so they need to be well connected to surrounding areas.
- These districts will not have parking directly in front of every store, as shopping centers do, so they need intuitively predictable parking systems.
- Downtowns will have the most interesting and venerated buildings, landscapes, and symbolic elements in their town. The districts need to provide a setting that lives up to their standard of quality but does not overshadow these elements.
- Downtowns usually best represent early periods of a town’s development. They should be conserved so that they can continue to be part of the interesting mix of development periods found in a town.
- Historic commercial districts should be places for authentic experience of what it means to be a town dweller, and they should continue to be important places for public events, social interaction, and government facilities (from Crankshaw 2008, pp. 3-4).

The Fragile Phenomenology of Juhani Pallasmaa

M. Reza Shirazi

Shirazi is an Iranian architect who taught and practiced in his home country for five years. Since 2005, he has been a doctoral student in the L.S. Theorie der Architektur, Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus [Brandenburg University of Technology] in Cottbus, Germany, under the supervision of Prof. Eduard Führ. Shirazi's dissertation is entitled, "Architectural Theory and Practice and the Question of Phenomenology: The Contribution of Tadao Ando to the Phenomenological Discourse." He is co-editor of Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, an international journal of architectural theory. mr_shirazi@yahoo.com. © 2009 M. Reza Shirazi.

Juhani Pallasmaa is a Finnish architect and phenomenologist whose numerous writings on phenomenology have played a vital role in developing phenomenological discourse in architecture. Influenced by Husserl and his notion of "presuppositionless looking," Pallasmaa writes that phenomenology "means 'pure looking at' the phenomenon" or "viewing its essence" [1].

One prominent aspect of Pallasmaa's phenomenology is his notion of "multi-sensory architecture." His attention to the supremacy of vision in both Western philosophy and architecture points to a problematic emphasis in the history of the perception of space. He proposes that the almost neglected presence of all the senses except sight in the perceptual process gives a special quality to his understanding of phenomenology. He explains: "Experience of architecture is multi-sensory; qualities of matter, space and scale are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle. Architecture strengthens... one's sense of being in the world, essentially giving rise to a strengthened experience of self" [2].

In fact, an architecture of the senses holds us near to things and brings us into the "within." Criticizing the supremacy of vision is criticizing "phenomenology from without"—a phenomenology founded in "viewing from distance" and a "far looking at." Instead, the aim must be a "phenomenology from within"—a "near phenomenology." Often drawing on a cinematic language, Pallasmaa presents mostly architectural "close ups"—not "long

shots" [3]. In this sense, his approach to perception is rooted in what he calls a "sensory architecture" through which the body approaches things intimately and experiences them as "nearby."

A second prominent aspect of Pallasmaa's architectural phenomenology is his emphasis on architectural experience as a verb rather than as a noun. In interpreting architecture as a verb, one focuses on action and movement in perception. This perspective emphasizes multi-sensory engagement, since the moving body is typically more open and present to the moment than the static body. As he explains, "A building is encountered; it is approached, confronted, related to one's body, moved through, utilized as a condition for other things. Architecture directs, scales, and frames actions, perceptions, and thoughts" [4].

In this regard, Pallasmaa criticizes three current tendencies in architecture: The commodification of buildings; the self-defeating search for newness; and the hegemony of the marketable image. Instead, he contends that architectural theory, criticism, and education must return attention to the now-neglected cultural grounds of architecture, attempting to present a more complete experience of the building grounded in the fullness of bodily encounter rather than the experiential limitations of visual interpretation only. One example he uses is the visual constriction of computer-aided design:

By reinforcing visual manipulation and graphic production, computer imaging further detaches architecture from its multi-sensory essence; as design tools, computers can encourage mere visual manipulation and make us neglect our powers of empathy and imagination. We become voyeurs obsessed with visuality, blind not only to architecture's social reality but also to its functional, economic, and technological realities [5].

Instead of a reductive, visual understanding of architecture, Pallasmaa advocates a turn toward haptic experience, which is grounded in a gradual comprehension of architecture, detail by detail, because it affects all the senses and the body as a whole. This mode of experience requires empathy and patience but is crucial because it offers nearness and affection rather than distance and control.

Moreover, instead of attending to a one-dimensional, image-based approach to architecture, Pallasmaa suggests attention to "peripheral vision," which goes beyond the object to perceive it contextually. As he explains, "focused vision makes us mere observers; peripheral perception transforms retinal images into spatial and bodily experience, encouraging participation" [6].

Drawing on Gianni Vattimo's ideas of "weak ontology" and "fragile thought," Pallasmaa prescribes, as a counter to today's visually-dominant architecture, what he calls a "fragile architecture"—i.e., an architecture of the "fragile image," which is "contextual, multi-sensory, and responsive, concerned with experiential interaction and sensual accommodation. This architecture grows gradually, scene by scene, rather than quickly manifesting a simple, domineering concept" [7].

In a similar way, Pallasmaa proposes a "weak urbanism" that might counter the dominant approach to town and urban planning grounded in precisely organized strategies and strong urban forms that dominate the city visually. In some ways, his alternative is similar to medieval townscapes that arose organically without consciously-directed principles or designs. Pallasmaa emphasizes that this kind of "weak urbanism" is mostly haptic rather than ocular: "The eye reinforces strong strategies, whereas weak principles of urbanity give rise to the haptic townscape of intimacy and participation" [8].

Drawing on his idea of a "fragile architecture," I call Pallasmaa's way of architectural understand-

ing a "fragile phenomenology." In this sense, one can say that fragile phenomenology tends to be contextual and multi-sensory. It emphasizes experiential interactions and sensuous accommodations that grow gradually, sense by sense. Fragile phenomenology surpasses the hegemony of vision, enriches the presence of the body, pays attention to lived experience, and replaces one-dimensional vision by multi-sensory perception.

But when considering Pallasmaa's interpretations of architectural works based on his "fragile phenomenology," one notes that they generally suffer from two weaknesses, the first of which is rooted in his excessive concentration on "nearness," staying mostly "within" and presenting "close ups" in experiencing a work of architecture. This "near" attention neglects considering a work of architecture in macro-level—in other words, in its relationship and linkage to the larger-scale surroundings and region. One can draw on architectural phenomenologist Christian Norberg-Schulz's terminology and say that the fragile phenomenology of Pallasmaa does not consider the *genius loci* of the work; it immediately enters the realm of the building and its immediate surroundings, interpreting only the building in detail [9].

A second weakness of Pallasmaa's fragile phenomenology is that, in many of his design investigations, the interpretations sometimes seem episodic and disjointed rather than in-depth and continuous. Most of his analyses are partial selections through which he highlights some particular aspect of architectural experience.

One example is in the second part of *Eyes of the Skin* where he discusses the importance and presence of the senses separately to show how human perception is fundamentally fulfilled not merely through the eyes but through all the senses. Pallasmaa divides his discussion into each sense separately, offering evidence to prove the importance of the sense in question.

In providing concrete examples, he claims that the architecture of Le Corbusier and Richard Meyer "clearly favour sight, either as a frontal encounter, or the kinesthetic eye of the *promenade architecturale*" [10]. He argues that the architecture of Erich

Mandelsohn and Hans Scharoun emphasizes muscular and haptic plasticity because these architects suppress the ocular perspectival dominance. He claims that Frank Gehry's buildings evoke kinesthetic and haptic sensations and that Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture "is based on a full recognition of the embodied human condition and of the multitude of instinctual reactions hidden in the human unconscious" [11]. He contends that Alvar Aalto's architecture involves a deep muscular and haptic sensation:

Aalto's architecture incorporates dislocations, skew confrontations, irregularities and poly-rhythms in order to arouse these bodily, muscular and haptic experiences. His elaborate surface textures and details, crafted for the hand, invite the sense of touch and create an atmosphere of intimacy and warmth. Instead of the disembodied Cartesian idealism of the architecture of the eye, Aalto's architecture is based on sensory realism; his buildings are not based on a single dominant concept or Gestalt; they are sensory agglomerations" [12].

For all the architects that he refers to here, Pallasmaa presents broad claims but never gives detailed evidence to make his claims convincing. What is absent is a "multi-sensory" interpretation of a given work. Instead, what is introduced is mostly selective, one-sense-focused interpretations of different buildings and architects rather than a multi-sensory interpretation of "one" work.

This style of presenting evidence leads to an incomplete understanding of a building's comprehensive architectural experience. In other words, Pallasmaa does not demonstrate how a work of architecture affects all the senses, or how we can perceive a work of architecture in a multi-sensory way. One might say that his interpretations provide a partial set of phenomenological concerns rather than a comprehensive phenomenological reading of particular buildings or places. Obviously, this comprehensive way of interpretation stands against his "fragile phenomenology," by which he intends to provide a multi-sensory, multi-dimensional, and gradual comprehension of architecture.

To illustrate the weaknesses of Pallasmaa's "fragile phenomenology," I review one of his most prominent interpretations—his book-

length discussion of Alvar Aalto's Villa Mairea [13]. I examine how he applies his "fragile phenomenology" in interpreting this building and how the result illustrates the shortcomings highlighted above.

Pallasmaa begins his interpretation of the Villa Mairea broadly. He considers the house as an example of the ideal relationship between the architect and the client—in this case, wealthy Maire Gullichsen, who requested that Aalto make something Finnish but in a contemporary spirit [14]. Pallasmaa explains that Aalto had considerable freedom in the design process, discussing every detail with the client and changing some aspects of the house's design as construction proceeded.

Pallasmaa claims that, although Aalto was a functionalist in the 1920s, his design philosophy gradually changed so that, by 1935, he condemned functionalist rationalism. Aalto came to believe that "rational" design suffered from a noticeable lack of human qualities. As he explained in 1940,

[I]t is not the rationalization itself that was wrong in the first and now past period of modern architecture. The wrongness lies in the fact that the rationalization has not gone deep enough. Instead of fighting rational mentality, the newest phase of modern architecture tries to project rational methods from the technical field out to human and psychological fields.... Technical functionalism is correct only if enlarged to cover even the psychophysical field. That is the only way to humanize architecture [15].

Pallasmaa interprets the Villa Mairea as a model of Aalto's changing ideas: "The design and execution of the Mairea take place in the middle of this essential change in Aalto's philosophical stance" [16]. Pallasmaa points to resemblances between Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater and Aalto's Villa Mairea that probably resulted from parallel intentions. Both houses have a horizontal configuration in which the low, main spaces flow toward the outdoors and make a fusion of architecture, landscape, and nature. In both houses, too, the focal point of the living areas is the hearth, which projects a primordial sense of protection and homeliness. Pallasmaa explains that "The two houses arouse strong tactile and motoric experiences, and both exhibit a wide spectrum of atmospheres rang-

ing from archaic heaviness and rusticity to extreme elegance and lightness” [17].

Another characteristic of the Villa Mairea that Pallasmaa draws attention to is the independence and separation of its two floors. The ground floor encompasses the living spaces; and the first floor, the sleeping area. While the living spaces are open to the courtyard, the bedrooms have little contact with it; for example, the guest room and corridor have not been provided with even a glimpse of the courtyard. Pallasmaa writes:

Even the opening of the main staircase on the second floor, which is the main mediator between the two levels, has been subtly closed by a floor slab to diminish the visual impact of the vertical connection. Consequently, there is a feeling of privacy and secrecy, and the stairs appear to slide downwards in opposition to the normal reading of a rising staircase [18].

Having introduced the Villa Mairea, Pallasmaa begins his phenomenological reading, based on his concept of sensory architecture. He states that the house exemplifies the strategy of a “fragile architecture” grounded in “an additive and episodic ensemble that grows detail by detail from below”—not an all-powering, ideal abstract structure dictated from above. He contends that Aalto “was not a Cartesian idealist, but a Bergsonian sensory realist. He aims at a perceptual impact from the real vantage point of the viewer instead of intellectual formal considerations” [19].

Further, Pallasmaa claims that the Villa Mairea reflects not a retinal architecture but a tactile architecture evoking all the senses and needing to be experienced through the body’s moving through the house’s spaces. This interpretation derives from a verb-like notion of space grounded in motive experience—not a noun-like notion grounded in stasis and constancy. In this regard, Pallasmaa equates the experience of the Villa Mairea with a forest walk in which we confront numerous stimuli and details that are integrated into the embodied perception of moving through space: “There is no given centre point; the perceiver himself is the moving centre of his experience, and the situations unfold as an unbroken flow of observations” [20].

Pallasmaa also argues that Aalto considered both biological analogies and psychological dimen-

sions in his designs; thus, the emotional impact of his architecture is rooted in sensuous, archaic images of shelter, protection, comfort, togetherness, and familiarity. He claims that, in the Villa Mairea, two contrasting aspects of Finnish dwelling are presented: Direct summer connection with the outdoors as illustrated most dramatically by the courtyard; and a sheltering winter face illustrated by interior furnishings that emphasize warmth.

Pallasmaa also contends that Aalto uses a collage technique by which images of continental modernity fuse with a timeless, vernacular tradition. The result, he claims, is a brilliant fusion of oppositions: modernity vs. tradition, avant-garde vs. primordial. Pallasmaa’s evidence, expressed in collage-like fashion, is architectural details presented without order or sequence. One example is his discussion of the house’s sauna terrace, which juxtaposes modernist steel and concrete construction with rustic wood structures. The house is thus “archaic and modern, rustic and elegant, regional and universal at the same time. It refers simultaneously to the past and the future; it is abundant in its imagery and, consequently, provides ample soil for individual psychic attachment” [21]. The result, Pallasmaa argues, is that the Villa Mairea relates to the deepest existential dimensions of life and evokes a powerful architectural lived space:

The building is thoroughly integrated and, regardless of numerous surprises and incongruities, the whole is firmly held together by a consistent atmosphere. The whole is reflected in its parts: the folded mass of the studio and the twisted entrance anticipate the freely rhythmic flow of interior spaces. The flue of the fireplace behind the end wall of the dining room unexpectedly cuts diagonally across the roof to a chimney concealed in the wall of the service wing; it incorporates the stairs and creates a diagonal cut in the interior wall which is further echoed in the slight slant of the ceiling of the dining room [22].

The examples I have presented here illustrate how Pallasmaa interprets the Villa Mairea in terms of a fragile phenomenology. On one hand, this interpretation remains collage-like, episodic, and partial, so that it is difficult to draw a clear, comprehensive understanding of the building. Rather, the perceiver appears to be a bird-like seer who flies over and through the building, focusing

his or her interpretation on special parts and places of the house that appear interesting or surprising. Although Pallasmaa considers the Villa Mairea a collage-like building, its episodic character does not necessarily require an episodic reading. If, as Pallasmaa suggests, a fragile phenomenology should develop gradually, step by step, the concern is that his way of interpreting the house is more arbitrary and piecemeal than comprehensively considered and holistic.

On the other hand, Pallasmaa's "near" reading of the Villa Mairea invokes a "phenomenology from within." We gain a close, in-depth phenomenological understanding of the house, though its relation and linkage to site and surroundings are largely neglected. In Pallasmaa's interpretation of Villa Mairea, the way this building is related to its environment remains disregarded. We only see the house in "close up" apart from any wider-ranging *genius loci*.

To be sure, Pallasmaa's contribution to phenomenological discourse is immensely important. By means of his fragile phenomenology, we may discover hidden, not-yet-considered aspects of architecture. He offers a way to develop a deep, multi-sensory, and lived experience of architecture. In pointing out weaknesses of his fragile phenomenology, I certainly do not wish to imply that his work is a failure. Rather, I suggest that, by identifying and discussing these concerns, the method of fragile phenomenology might be strengthened and extended with the result that our understanding of architecture and architectural experience might be made more penetrating and comprehensive.

Endnotes

1. J. Pallasmaa, The Geometry of Feeling: A Look at the Phenomenology of Architecture, in K. Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing A New Agenda For Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965—1995* (NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p. 450. Perhaps the single best introduction to Pallasmaa's phenomenological writings on architecture is J. Pallasmaa, *Encounters: Architectural Essays*, P. MacKeith, ed. (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Oy, 2005). I would like to thank David Seamon for his help in editing this essay and for his thoughtful remarks and comments.
2. J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes Of The Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (London: Academy Editions, 1996), p. 28.
3. In fact, Pallasmaa, has written on the relation between architecture and film; see J. Pallasmaa, *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema* (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Oy, 2001).
4. J. Pallasmaa, Stairways of the Mind, in *Encounters*, p. 60.
5. J. Pallasmaa, Towards an Architecture of Humility, in *Encounters*, p. 193.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
8. J. Pallasmaa, Hapticity and Time, in *Encounters*, p. 328.
9. C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (NY: Rizzoli, 1980).
10. J. Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin*, p. 49.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. J. Pallasmaa, Image and Meaning, in J. Pallasmaa, ed., *Alvar Aalto: Villa Mairea* (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation, 1998), pp. 70-125.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
15. A. Aalto, Humanizing Architecture, *Sketches*, pp. 77-78 [1940]; cited in J. Pallasmaa, J., ed. *Alvar Aalto: Villa Mairea*, p. 75.
16. J. Pallasmaa, Image and Meaning, p. 75.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
21. J. Pallasmaa, Identity, Intimacy and Domicile: Notes on the Phenomenology of Home [originally 1992], available at: <http://www2.uiah.fi/opintoasiat/history2/pallas.htm> [accessed 15 December 2008].
22. J. Pallasmaa, Image and Meaning, p. 98.

Thinking and Building in a More Ordinary Way

Christopher Chamberlin

Chamberlin is a fifth-year master's student in Architecture at Kansas State University. Originally written for David Seamon's "Theories of Place" seminar, this essay is partly a meditation on two books by philosopher Robert Mugerauer: Heidegger's Language and Thinking (1988); and Interpretations on Behalf of Place (1994). ctc@ksu.edu. © 2009 Christopher Chamberlin.

The most thought-provoking thing in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.

—Martin Heidegger

Philosopher Martin Heidegger writes that we “can learn only if we always unlearn at the same time. Applied to the matter before us, we can learn thinking only if we radically unlearn what thinking has been traditionally” (quoted in Mugerauer 1988, p. 76).

This idea of “unlearning” can be applied to the entire process of understanding phenomenologically. To see things clearly, we must strip away everything that has built up over time to understand the subject of our thought from a clearer and fuller perspective. We attempt to suspend taken-for-granted approaches, traditions, and degraded understandings and symbols so we can locate the real or original meaning lying behind. We then formulate an appropriate and truly thoughtful response. Most important to architecture and environmental design is replacing thinking with building. Such deconstruction is really preparation for rebuilding.

Every tangible thing was once in another form as some other thing. Somehow, the most minute building blocks of things get rearranged with each of these iterations. The components of the cells in my body have not always been here, in this particular arrangement, and they will never be again. Even as I type these words, I scatter innumerable skin cells into the air. I am not the same person I was when I started this sentence.

We must ask ourselves whether it is satisfactory, as thinking beings, to accept the present state of things constantly in a state of flux. If we are to take these things at present value, without examining what it is that composes them or what lies hidden beneath their surfaces, we essentially have learned

and thought nothing. We have simply seen a thing. So, too, with ideas.

The most commonplace existence swarms with images and symbols. Let us repeat... that symbols never disappear from the reality of the psyche. The aspect of them may change, but their function remains the same; one has only to look behind the latest masks... The life of modern man is swarming with half-forgotten myths, decaying hierophanies, and secularized symbols... (Mircea Eliade, quoted in Mugerauer 1994, p. 101).

We must understand that virtually every idea we encounter was once in another form. These ideas are not new creations, static or dead. These ideas that we hold so tightly, that we aspire to freeze in time, are living things as much as our own bodies but simply in a different sense. They grow with time and die with time. Certain aspects of one idea may nourish others or spotlight the original intent of yet some other ideas, which were once in yet some other form, perhaps arising originally near a tree in bloom. The tree is there too. What we must learn is not to struggle to freeze an idea but to hold it lightly near us—to let it *be* in its truest form and to understand where it came from and where it may take us if we might only step beyond the everyday.

In many ways, phenomenology can transcend time. Nietzsche's work—a common focus in Heidegger's essays on thinking and language—illustrates what Nietzsche called “revenge against time.” This notion refers to how our will is unable to affect the past. It can affect things in the present and thus can also affect the future, but it cannot change what has already been. In this way, we experience anxiety and frustration about a facet of

time that we cannot touch: “[W]illing suffers from what is revolting to it” (Mugerauer 1988, p. 71).

If, however, one could suspend all ideas and meanings and understand what the masks and symbols once meant, then he or she would have a power to defeat the past. Through this understanding, things of the past might remain alive in the present. Only when we remain inertial to degraded symbols and think no further, does the past truly defeat us. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger prescribe a way of thinking that goes far to free us from this anxiety for revenge against a past we cannot change.

And so we see that to struggle to exist at one time as one thing or to imprison an idea as it was when first encountered is to cause our own discomfort with time. In this way of being and understanding, we misunderstand reality itself and lose the greatest value of ideas or things—namely, that they never remain what they first were.

It is likely that the surge we see in placelessness today (Relph 1976) has much to do with our own understanding of making and building, which is similar to a static approach to thinking. Instead of understanding the needs that the built environment must fulfill and thereby foster the appropriate experience, we have become accustomed to creating environmental structures—tract housing, big-box stores, parking garages, multi-lane highways, and all the rest—that are produced efficiently and quickly. By holding money and time too tightly, we let ourselves *misthink* and *misbuild*. If we accept placelessness, we let ourselves forget even more deeply what the masks we wear and symbols we use once meant, and what they might mean again if we could think and build in a more originary way.

To Think and Thank Again

Next, we must ask what it means to actually think about these matters. We cannot interpret the present or past meanings of our ideas and degraded symbols unless we first understand what it means to think. We can employ Heidegger’s approach to locate a deeper understanding of thinking. He writes:

When we think through what this is, that a tree in bloom presents itself to us so that we can come and stand face to face with it, the thing that matters first and foremost, and finally, is not to drop the tree in bloom, but for once let it stand where it

stands. Why do we say “finally”? Because to this day, thought has never let the tree stand where it stands (quoted in Mugerauer 1988, p. 79)

Philosopher Robert Mugerauer (ibid.) clarifies Heidegger’s understanding by arguing that his focus is one key question: What is thinking? Heidegger works to describe what it means for human beings to think; he considers how ways of thinking, including about this question, have evolved over time. Starting with this key question, Heidegger asks four more focused questions derived from the linguistic implications contained in the primary question:

- What is called Thinking?
- What names Thinking?
- What does Thinking call for?
- What calls for Thinking?

These questions are hidden in the primary question and help to elucidate what the thing known as thinking might be, what has come to call the thing thinking, what responsibilities or possible skills the thing of thinking might require, and what specific situations or things require us to think (ibid., p. 63).

Before we answer the primary question, we must tackle these four, which are all part of the same concern and all equally relevant. We strip away any traditional understandings, using these questions to deepen meaning. Heidegger argues that in traditional understanding:

Thinking names the forming of representational ideas, understood according to the doctrine of logic, and what thinking calls for is our learning how to think the Being of beings. It must think that to which [human beings are] ultimately related: that which calls for thinking is the Being of beings (ibid., p. 75).

Thinking and Building

As a student of architecture, I find it important to consider Heidegger’s questions by substituting “building” for “thinking.” If we wish to know what it is to build and to strive for a restored sense of place in the designed world, then we must consider what it means to build. Our four questions become:

- What is called Building?
- What names Building?
- What does Building call for?
- What calls for Building?

Building may be understood as the necessary act of creating shelter for surviving comfortably. We might argue that at one time Logic, as with thinking, also named building. Here, we use logic and reason to stack, lean, mortar, weave, and otherwise arrange various materials in new ways such that we may find the shelter and comfort that we desire.

The act of building in an originary way calls us to think the Being of beings. In turn, the Being of beings calls for building itself. At one time, these four answers sufficed to create the act and art of primal building and designing of environments and places. Eventually, things became more complex, and superfluous additions were added. We lost sight of the original, important reasons for doing this thing of building that we must do.

But what does thinking mean beyond the traditionally accepted “formation of representational ideas.” Heidegger explains that the the root of the word “thinking” is in the Old English *thanc*, which meant “thank” in the modern sense and not the “think” we assume. Heidegger aims for the archaic meaning of thought, revealing something more akin to thanking or memory (ibid., p. 78). He writes:

We stand before a tree in bloom, for example—and the tree stands before us. The tree faces us. The tree and we meet one another, as the tree stands there and we stand face to face with it. As we are in this relation of one to the other and before the other, the tree and we are. This face-to-face meeting is not, then, one of these ‘ideas’ buzzing about in our heads.... But... while science records the brain currents, what becomes of the tree in bloom? What becomes of the meadow? What becomes of the man— not of the brain, but of the man, who may die under our hands tomorrow and be lost to us, and who at one time came to our encounter? (ibid., p. 79).

Heidegger argues that the representational thought we claim to be so rational does not hold the capability of “[bringing] forth the blossoming tree in its radiance and fragrance nor [leaving] it where it belongs” (ibid., p. 79). There is, in other words, more to thought than we ascribe to it today. Degraded symbols and meanings should be rediscovered before we concretize positions grounded in premises that we may fail to fully understand.

Things Forgotten

Heidegger claims that “[O]riginary things are understood as the sites or occasions where the four

fundamental dimensions of reality—earth, heavens, mortals, and the divine—concretely gather into a world” (Mugerauer 1994, p. 68). Today, it is no wonder that we experience a loss of place and originary dwelling. It is difficult to find places where these four dimensions of reality congregate to instill a world with some meaning or experience for those human beings present in and to that world.

Of the earth

We begin by considering the most concrete of these four dimensions—the earth on which we reside. Some 50 years ago, urban planner E. A. Gutkind pointed out that the predominant environmental attitude of modern Western people is over-confidence and exploitation in regard to nature and the earth (Gutkind 1956). Too many people assume they have complete power to shape and change the face of the planet at whim—to control, rebuild, or destroy any natural ecosystem or human landmark that has no utilitarian value as human beings define that value.

Even though we recognize major environmental problems like pollution, species extinction, and climate change, many Western people still hold the attitude that, when we decide to build, we simply scrape the earth “clean” and construct the new object we prefer. Even in these times of sustainability and green architecture, it is rare within our Western system of design and construction to find a building that reacts directly to the earth itself and to the existing site. As Mugerauer explains:

Heidegger describes our age as homeless even though we are entering the era of our greatest power and technological mastery over everything, including ourselves, and seem to be able to be at home anywhere on our planet... [T]hough we more and more are able to do what we will, to most fully control whatever comes within our reach, and to live anywhere as we wish, we also find ourselves alienated from the world and from our own human nature (Mugerauer 1994, p. 67).

The designable, material reality of our lives has been relegated to the background, even though we live directly upon the earth. We occupy air-conditioned homes and automobiles, sealed from the outside world, enjoying our consumer goods and mass media.

We also separate ourselves mentally from the earth, which becomes little more than a picturesque

backdrop in which to recreate. The result is that we become physically and existentially severed from the pleasures and dangers of earth. We mostly ignore the thing on which we live, simply because we assume as a society that it has no power over us that cannot be shackled by one form or the other of scientific and technological infrastructure.

Of the heavens

We have also largely left behind the heavens—the wind and rain, the sun and moon, the stars in their cycles. All these things can have a profound effect on human beings but, in our homes and other buildings, we mostly ignore these things as we construct our own energies and gauges of time—human-produced light, heat, coolness, humidity, thermostats, clocks, Blackberries, and all the rest.

But burning fossil fuels can never bear clean air or bathe our skin in the sun or light our spaces warmly and without waste, while also always reminding us of how our own circadian rhythms dovetail with the much vaster cosmos. The smell of flowers, freshly-cut grass, or impending rain does not often drift through our windows. Cities generate light pollution and smudge out signs of the cosmos. At times, one forgets completely that we inhabit a living planet rather than some virtual world.

Of the divine

For thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger, our age is the “death of God.” These thinkers refer not to deities but to that aspect of reality through which the sacred might manifest (Mugerauer 1994, p. 75). In our time, the divine has become commercial, packaged, and readily consumable for our society of instant gratification. God himself must be made easy for the masses to swallow, for if he asked people to change or to become seriously involved with the sacred, they would banish him even from his current counterfeit manifestation. Sermons become pep talks; masses are streamlined to make people feel happy. Churches are reduced to horribly cheap, meaningless buildings—light-gauge-steel warehouses with entry-façade veneer.

When did people stop searching for a creator with their hearts? In times when we starved and struggled to survive, people prayed. Now that things are easy, we mostly cease to search for things and

events that might give some fuller sense of our extraordinary cosmos, which we readily take for granted. We turn our backs on any real spiritual search, allowing material possessions and liquid assets to take its place.

I do not argue here for some nostalgic religious revival or for the existence of some Final Creator. My point is that human beings need a space for the divine—they need to discover and hold sacred places whereby the everyday expands and we move beyond our own personal situations to ponder things and possibilities greater and more meaningful.

Of mortals

In *Place and Placelessness*, geographer Edward Relph (1976) sought to uncover the dynamics of our modern world that feed the growing sense of placelessness attached to much of our designed environment. Relph highlights psychologist R. J. Lifton’s idea of “Protean Man,” who:

changes his identity almost at will as he shifts from lifestyle to lifestyle, trying out new options and exploring alternatives... Lifton argues that protean man represents a major shift from the traditional view that each individual should present a consistent and stable identity throughout his life” (ibid., p. 133).

Relph points out that, today, human beings are becoming placeless even *inside themselves*. If we cease to enjoy a particular self, we dispose of it and apply a new persona. Just as we’ve become placeless outside, so on the inside we also shift, sprawl, and lose track of any inner core. We fail to see that this fast-paced, technological world that forces us to be fluid and changeable is our own creation. Exactly when did we allow it to reach inside to affect superficial change?

We have also lost touch with the relationship between life and death. Rarely do people awake to the sunrise, pondering the possibility that this sunrise may be their last. We hold ourselves higher than mortality because we live in a world where we no longer need to fight for survival. In such a situation, should we not give greater thanks for the protection and extension of life science and technology offer?

I would argue that we had more right to give mortality the cold shoulder when it taunted us daily. Instead, today, we physically push death away, hiding it behind institutions that include long-term care

facilities, hospitals, and hospices. We hide death from ourselves, supposing that the “golden” years should be spent in seclusion.

A personal story might make my point. I don’t know what circumstances surrounded my great grandmother’s recent death, first discovered by a nurse who came to her room to give her morning pills and convince her that she should eat breakfast. But my great grandmother had died the previous night, and none of her family was present because “it was cleaner that way” and she “liked it there.”

Originary Dwelling

In the past, human beings had no choice but to engage the four dimensions of reality, working to survive and struggling toward stability while staving off dissonance by powers beyond their own control (Mugerauer 1994, p. 155). In our time, things are not so hard. In many cases, the most difficult part of daily living is coping with people and human relationships. Our world is grounded in verbal interactions and perceptions of other minds. In our narrow focus on people, we lose sight of earth, heavens, mortality, and divinity.

I believe that, by designing with all four dimensions in mind, we might come closer to a revived sense of place: To live again with and on the earth as opposed to simply using it; to utilize the heavens and related environmental cycles for lighting and conditioning our spaces; to keep the search for the divine alive; and to understand our own mortal selves within the world and greater cosmos.

Originary dwelling happens when “we preserve the earth, heavens, divine, and our own nature as they are disclosed to us” (ibid., p. 72). Imagine, for example, the big-box retail venue. Within these walls, we do not find any hint of the earth itself. Everything around us has been processed, sanitized, and cleaned to a super-real sense. We are aware of no breezes, sunlight, or sky. We cannot tell whether it is day or night. There is nothing sacred about this store. Within these walls, we are essentially led to believe that we are immortal, presented with an endless supply of affordably priced goods that will keep us well fed, entertained, and looking young.

In our fast-paced postmodern era, we find ourselves comfortable. We let ourselves become lazy and lose sight of what it really means to create places. If as a society, we could realize what it means to move beyond the lifeworld as we know it and engage the four dimensions of reality in a more robust or real sense, we might begin to understand consciously what it means to create meaningful places in a new, self-actualizing way.

Self-Conscious Responsibility?

I have argued here that, to better understand building and thereby to make better places, we must, first, understand what thinking and building are today and what they might become; second, draw on Heidegger’s understanding of the four dimensions of world to create places that respond directly to key dimensions of our human nature.

In 1956, Gutkind foresaw a transformative stage in the people-environment relationship: The need to replace environmental control and exploitation with a new era of self-conscious responsibility toward natural and human worlds. I believe that, once we explore the nature of thinking and building more thoughtfully, through the kinds of questions toward which Heidegger points, we might move toward Gutkind’s self-conscious responsibility and Heidegger’s originary dwelling.

Is this “humble reverence” and “dedicated attention to the simple” (Mugerauer 1994, p. 94) so easy without the innocence and ignorance presupposed in humankind’s earlier historical and cultural development? Only time will truly tell, but the first step is to peel back the layers—to think, to thank, and to try to rebuild even if the answers may be completely different from what we expect.

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Third Letter from Far South: Inhabiting Intercultural History

John Cameron

This essay is the third in 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. To read his two earlier letters, see the winter and fall 2008 issues of EAP. Jcameronvking@optusnet.com.au. © 2009 John Cameron.

I noted in my first letter that living on Bruny Island has given my life partner Vicki and me the opportunity to put into practice the ideas of place responsiveness we taught at university, and that continues to be the case in surprising and unintended ways.

One of the perennial questions that emerged in classes concerned the origins of a sense of place. Does it arise from our awareness of the lives of others who live and have lived in the place, the accretion of stories and the marks of their presence left behind, or from the features of the land, its non-human inhabitants, and its inherent qualities as we perceive them?

European progressive thinkers about place, such as Doreen Massey, have argued that sense of place is best thought of as deriving from a network of social relations; non-human influences are rarely mentioned [1]. Many of our students reacted against this human-centeredness, feeling that their experience of Australian places was integrally connected with the land itself.

I suggested to students that it was surely not one or the other. The more interesting question was how the two sets of influences interact to produce that elusive but profound *felt* response to certain places. Recent events on Bruny Island have brought these issues to the fore in a very personal way.

Living at the end of a long private gravel road, we rarely have unanticipated visitors, so it was quite a surprise to find a real-estate agent standing at our door one Sunday morning last year. It was a courtesy call, he explained, to let us know that the 20 acres of degraded paddocks with a

coastal woodland strip on the southern side of our land would be auctioned in four weeks.

This was most unwelcome news. Our nearest neighbors live a kilometer away, out of sight behind a ridge, whereas a potential buyer would likely build close to the water, perhaps within 100 meters of our house. The sense of spaciousness, isolation, and immersion in the natural world we treasure was suddenly jeopardized. A building and road in the middle of the narrow strip of coastal woodland would destroy wildlife habitat and disrupt passage of wallabies and other native creatures along the only tree-lined corridor in an expanse of bare fields.

After recovering from dismay at the potential sale of the land and the prohibitively expensive asking price, we decided we had to act for personal, ecological, and heritage reasons. When we first arrived on Bruny Island, we had heard that the remains of an old historical site lay somewhere in the woodland now for sale, but we had been unable to locate the site, nor could our 80-year-old neighbor who had been shown it 20 years ago.

When we inquired, the president of the Bruny Island Historical Society confirmed the existence of ruins of an old hut constructed of earthen and clay sods in the vicinity. As far as she knew, however, it hadn't been visited for 20 years, so its exact whereabouts, or even if there were still visible remains, was uncertain.

Soon afterward, she sent us a 1988 photograph of the hut, and we ventured across the barbed-wire fence to search again. After considerable roaming about, attempting to match fence lines and trees, we found ourselves in front of a roughly rectangular-shaped earthen mound about two feet high topped

by a long-established sheep trail. The mound was perched above the shore close to a creek bed and was the size of two small rooms. Delighted to have rediscovered it, we gazed in wonder. This was the “sod hut” reputed to be the place where the “Protector of Aborigines,” George Augustus Robinson, commenced his so-called “Friendly Mission” in 1829 at the behest of the colony’s Governor to gather the remaining Tasmanian Aboriginal people and take them to Flinders Island to the north of Tasmania.

Thus began our rapid immersion in intercultural history. We found a photograph taken a 100 years ago that showed elliptical earthen sods stacked high to form massive walls and a doorway corresponding to the gap at the front of the current ruins. Documents from the Historical Society indicated that the very first ration station was established here as part of Robinson’s Mission, that he left four sacks of bread at the hut, and when he returned the next day he found 13 of the local Nuenone Aboriginal people there.

These were virtually all that remained of Bruny Island’s indigenous population after two decades of disease and murder at the hands of European sealers, whalers, and settlers. The records implied that Truganini, a renowned Nuenone woman, had stood here at age 17 and encountered Robinson on her people’s tribal land. She’d had a harsh introduction to the ways of the white man—she witnessed her mother stabbed to death by a European, her uncle shot by a soldier, and her sister carried off by sealers. Worse was to come:

Timber getters killed the man Truganini was to marry. During a boat crossing of the Channel, she watched in horror as her husband-to-be was thrown into the sea. As he tried desperately to climb back onboard, the timber-getters cut off his hands and left him to drown. Truganini was then repeatedly raped [2].

Nevertheless, she accompanied Robinson as guide and translator, stating later that she considered that “he was not like the timber getters and the other white men, he was a good man and could speak our language” [3]. They traveled around the coast of Tasmania in harsh conditions, persuading most of the Aboriginal bands they encountered to accompany them to Flinders Island. Many of her

people died there from disease and deprivation before Robinson, his Friendly Mission a failure, moved with her and several others to the colony of Victoria. Truganini grew increasingly critical of Robinson and finally returned to Oyster Cove, visible across the Channel from here, to die in 1876 as disputedly the last remaining full-blood Tasmanian Aboriginal person. [4]

A large, full-color advertisement for the auction soon appeared in Hobart’s *Mercury* newspaper proclaiming “true waterfront to a sparkling turquoise bay, a private pebble beach and a sheltered anchorage... sweeping views with frontage to high-water mark on Blackstone Bay... awaiting an enterprising person to take this property to a new level.”

We watched with sinking hearts as potential buyers came from the water on luxurious yachts and on the road in expensive vehicles, even chartering small planes to inspect the land. The least we could do was alert interested parties to the existence of the sod hut and its historical significance.

We contacted the Tasmanian Heritage Council and found that we could nominate the hut for listing on the state’s heritage register. This required marshalling all the available literature on the sod hut, its features, history, significance, and evidence of its value to the local community. Our living room quickly became the repository of old documents, maps, books, photographs, and newspaper clippings.

We gathered the best of our material and, at the next community market at the neighboring village, we set up a table. Underneath the placard “Save the Sod Hut,” we informed our neighbors of the impending sale and collected the signatures of 40 local residents (out of a total north Bruny Island population of 100) on a petition to the Heritage Council.

Actively campaigning on a heritage and environmental issue in the local community was the last thing I expected to be doing barely a year after moving here. Our original intention had been to keep a low profile and set up a quiet place of retreat for ourselves. Bruny Island, like much of Tasmania, is a community strongly divided along environmental lines, with cars bearing bumper stickers demanding an end to old-growth forest logging lined

up on the ferry alongside those declaring “Greens Tell Lies.” In my previous work as a green economist and campaigner, I had witnessed the damaging effects on communities of such strong polarization, and wanted to be more of a mediator than an activist, if I were to take any visible role at all.

We submitted our nomination and petition to the Heritage Council, asking them to inform the real estate agent and thus potential buyers of the existence of the sod hut. We hoped this might discourage developers and might even bring forth someone who valued its cultural and natural heritage. Unfortunately, as the day of the auction approached, although the real estate agents received a letter from the Heritage Council, they did not feel it incumbent upon themselves to inform potential buyers. I prepared to attend the auction with our research material and inform the bidders about the sod hut and its heritage nomination.

Three days before the auction, I wandered restlessly over to the ruins again. All our efforts hadn’t amounted to much, and an unfortunate outcome seemed inevitable. Wasn’t there more we could do? I leaned up against the bark of a native box tree and gazed at the small clearing of native grasses below the ruins. I visualized the fateful meeting between Robinson and the Nuenone people in this very spot two centuries ago. I imagined where the access road and building site would most likely be, and the effect on the remaining strip of woodland and wildlife. The history of the place had come to life for me, and an unfortunate future was looming. In that moment, I felt a surge of determination to act.

“I really want to go for it, love,” I announced to Vicki when I returned to the house.

“Go for what?”

“Actually bid at the auction, seriously.”

She looked at me, surprised at the uncharacteristic force in my voice. We discussed whether we could afford enough out of our retirement money to make a realistic offer, but we both knew that the sort of person who could afford to charter a plane to inspect the property would outbid us quickly.

We arrived early and sat in the realtor’s parking lot assessing the affluence of the likely bidders by the size and model of their cars. With our hearts in

our mouths, we presented ourselves 15 minutes early and explained our intention to bring the existence of the sod hut to the attention of the bidders. We were ushered into a small empty office, waited to be shown into the main auction room, and were flabbergasted when the auctioneer came into the office and commenced his spiel.

“What about the other bidders?” Vicki exclaimed.

“You are the only bidders, but it is still an auction and I am required to proceed.”

It was a surreal event. The real estate agent engaged in a long and strange shuttle negotiation between us and the sellers, who were in a van in the parking lot. Their minimum price turned out to be just affordable for us, and a sale was finalized.

We walked out into the noonday sun feeling stunned. I had visualized a room packed with wealthy investors attracted by the glossy advertisements and the beautiful waterfront lot. Fortune had smiled on us. The real estate agent explained that different auction times had been advertised on different signs by mistake, and it had deterred a number of interested parties.

To celebrate, we went to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart to see Benjamin Duterrau’s famous 1840 painting, “The Conciliation.” It depicts Robinson meeting with Truganini and other Tasmanian Aboriginal people. How much more meaning the painting had for us now that we had suddenly become the custodians of the place where one of the earliest conciliatory meetings had happened! Vicki bought several books on Tasmanian Aboriginal history and the story of the painting itself so that we could deepen our knowledge.

We returned to Bruny and climbed over the fence onto our new land, still in a state of disbelief. I felt as if forces stronger than my own will were at work. Having prepared myself for a battle at the auction and thereafter with the new owner, we ourselves were suddenly the new custodians, or shortly would be. What a gift, what a responsibility!

I hadn’t taken more than 20 steps onto the new land when I stopped. There in the middle of the path in front of us was a large mottled tan and white feather from a sea eagle. Every time we see the

White-bellied sea eagle gliding along the shore or soaring over us in the fields, we stop in awe and appreciative silence, but we had never before come across one of its feathers. To encounter one for the first time in our path to the sod hut on the day we had become the future owners was a remarkable event. Surely this eagle's gift was auspicious.

Having received our nomination, the Heritage Council sent a researcher and surveyor to examine the site. They inspected it carefully, photographing and identifying the base of a possible bridge by the stream. In addition to some copies of correspondence from Governor Arthur establishing the ration station in 1828, they brought with them old maps of the area, including George Calder's original 1843 survey of the local coastline and accompanying notes. To see the coastline sketched in the original hand of the surveyor was intriguing, and we eagerly sought copies.

Several months afterward, we had the opportunity to contribute some artwork to a local exhibition on the island. Vicki came up with the idea of an installation based on the sod hut and our response to it. The exhibition would be held in the same community hall in which we had set up our petition, so it would be a way of reporting back to those who had supported us.

I took pastels, crayons, and watercolors out to the site and set myself up among some tussocks of dry native grasses. I hadn't used a watercolor brush on paper for decades and could still hear the echoes of my primary school art teacher and my artist mother discreetly suggesting that my talents must surely lie elsewhere. And indeed I didn't produce any masterpieces this time either, but the process of looking in depth at what was in front of me was revealing. What presented itself to the eye wasn't dramatic—a low rectangular hummock, the top of which was regrettably an eroding sheep trail, the interior of which formed a hollow covered in broad-leaved sagg grass. A few spindly black peppermint trees leaned over the ruins.

Yet I was undeniably drawn to this place. Part of the appeal was its history. Significant events occurred here, and the traces that remained invited imaginative reflection. The photograph from the

previous century helped me to visualize the scene—much larger trees and more of them. What was now a dry streambed would have flowed year round until all the trees on the slopes had been removed. There would have been a clearing in front of the hut where the Nuenone gathered; in fact, some of their stone tools are still here.

The placement of the ration station made sense. It had enough of a vantage spot over the Channel, looking toward Oyster Cove and Hobart from where boats came yet was sheltered from the southwesterly gales by the headland. Boats could easily be brought to shore on the stony beach. Even if there had been no ruins, it felt like a good place to sit. Vicki experienced different feelings here, sensing great melancholy, but she agreed that it would be a worthy site to put a rustic bench one day.

After seeing my first creative responses to the sod hut, she suggested I use local materials to evoke the place. If the sod hut was constructed out of earth, why not try to paint with it? After some trial and error, I found some clay near the hut that I vigorously mixed with water to make a thick slurry. I set up the old photographs amid the pots of clay "paint." Vicki drew on her years of teaching painting in English universities to guide me. For hours and days I built up the pages with rhythmic daubs of clay mimicking the layers of lozenge-shaped sods laid one on top of the other. I only realized later how this process echoed the third stage of Goethean scientific inquiry—the repeated drawing of a form to allow the "gesture" of its essential nature to be revealed.

Meanwhile, Vicki had become fascinated by Truganini and George Augustus Robinson, the two leading characters in the history of the sod hut. Duterrau depicted Robinson as pasty-faced and chubby with curly blond hair, narrow-set blue eyes, wearing a dapper striped shirt and an odd puffy cap reminiscent of a baker's hat. Truganini appeared as a beautiful young woman with close-cropped black hair, dark olive complexion and dark sorrowful eyes set far apart, wearing a shell necklace.

After making many drawings, Vicki painted detailed watercolor portraits of Truganini and Robinson and then portraits using the clay slurries on two

pieces of driftwood. She mounted the latter on a standing driftwood log with two sawn-off branches like arms and two saw marks incised across a tree trunk she had found on the shore below the sod hut.

This wooden figure, which was the size and girth of a human being, immediately set up a resonance between what had happened on the land, stripped of trees and scarred with erosion, and what had happened to its first peoples, taken from the island and left to perish in exile. She placed four burlap sacks at the base to represent the four sacks of bread that were left for the Nuenone as rations on the first night of the “Friendly Mission.”

To convey the multi-layered nature of the site, its history and our response to it, we put together a large album of our research with collaged copies of old documents, maps, surveys, Vicki’s photographs of the stones, trees and birds of Blackstone Bay, and fragments of our paintings and sketches. Vicki exhibited watercolors of the endangered bird species of Bruny Island and some driftwood bird sculptures. She also constructed two evocative sculptural pieces, “Vessel for Joy,” woven from eucalyptus bark and black cormorant feathers, and “Vessel for Grief,” made from rusted barbed wire and 13 black and white tern feathers, 13 being the number of the remaining Nuenone people who met with Robinson. I included my sod hut clay paintings.

Just before the exhibition, in a stroke of good timing, the Heritage Council informed us that our nomination had been accepted and that the sod hut and surrounding remnant coastal woodland would be permanently protected from development and listed on the Tasmanian Heritage Register. A copy of their letter completed our exhibit.

Once the installation was finished, I sat quietly in its midst, feeling strangely moved. Vicki had set it up so there was ample central space to walk between the various parts of the exhibit, which was animated by the physical presence of wood, earth, wire and feathers from the land, and by the historical presence of the Nuenone people and early settlers. Being surrounded by these tangible representations of the past and present in a different setting somehow amplified the experience of being at the

sod hut site, imagining the first contact and the original building. Truganini’s clay portrait looked across to the “Vessel for Grief,” and I sighed in recognition of the sorrow that had eluded me at the site itself.

There seems to have been a strange alchemy at work within me as a result of our immersion into the human history of the sod hut site and my appreciation of its natural qualities. The knowledge that George Augustus Robinson and Truganini were here on what has become our land galvanized our imaginations, gave us impetus to protect the site, and drew out our creative response.

My motivation to act with uncharacteristic determination came from the days I spent before the auction walking the land, sitting in the woodland, visualizing the early historical events, and sensing its differences and continuities with our existing place. The aspect and outlook were more sheltered, the eucalypts were taller with less undergrowth, but the two blocks of land definitely belonged together. My artwork came from a combination of early images of the hut and the physical sensations of sitting for hours sketching the hut as it is now.

In turn, sitting quietly within the completed installation of our creative work deepened my feelings about the sod hut site itself and its history. The alchemy of these accumulated impressions, histories, and images has led to an ever-deepening response to “Blackstone,” changed our role in the community, and transformed my sense of what it means to be custodians of this land. There has been a numinous quality to our story as well, with uncanny timings and the strange appearance of the eagle’s feather immediately after the auction.

The stories and discoveries continue. Blackstone Bay is so named because of its shingle of jet-black pebbles. These rounded stones fit wonderfully into the palm of the hand, become lustrous and warm when rubbed, and one accompanies me everywhere in my pocket as a talisman. Recently I have been exploring the geology of the Bay, and have called upon my early geological training to construct a plausible hypothesis for the origin of the black stones. Approximately 165 million years

ago, molten dolerite intruded into the cold sandstone beds. Where the two came into contact, the magma solidified rapidly into fine-grained black rock.

One day, to my amazement, I realized that the geological contact zone, where hot dark dolerite met cold pale sandstone, outcropped on the beach directly below the sod hut—the human contact zone where the white emissary first met the black Aboriginal inhabitants. I felt a shiver down my spine at the resonance between these human and geological events separated over vast periods of time. My previous letter described the interplay between daily experience and the expanses of geological time. Now we are inhabiting a third time scale—intercultural history—that seems a distant, lost time, yet one that is full of presences we still feel.

At the top of the hill above the bay is a pile of sandstone blocks the previous owner had stacked in preparation for the foundations of a house that was never built. Everywhere I look, there are poignant reminders of how futile many human projects are, and how transitory is our stewardship of the land.

What will be the stories and marks of our presence that we leave behind when we go? I take some solace from two facts. Even if we were to vanish tomorrow, at least the sod hut site is now part of the permanent heritage of Tasmania, and thousands of new trees are growing in once denuded paddocks. It may not fully return the gifts that are lavished on us by this place each day, but it is something.

Endnotes

1. Massey, D., *Space, Place and Gender* (London: Polity Press, 1996). Massey sought to rescue the notion of a sense of place from those critics who regarded it as irredeemably reactionary, being fixed in the past. Hence she came up with a more progressive, global sense of place formed through fluid social relationships. She was also writing from the context of inner London in which the impact of the more-than-human world is severely muted compared with most Australian places. In her most recent work, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), she expands her perspective, especially in chapter 12 when she writes of the geology of the Lake District and the elusiveness of place.
2. Reynolds, A. J., ed., *Keeping Culture: Aboriginal Tasmania* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2006), p. 27.
3. An excellent account of the early intercultural history of Tasmania is provided by Henry Reynolds in *Fate of a Free People* (London: Penguin, 1995). The quotations from Truganini are on p. 142.
4. As Reynolds documents (see note 2), many descendants of the original Tasmanian Aboriginal people live in Tasmania today and keep their culture alive through their strong relationship with the land, craft, art, literature, and political activism.