



# Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter

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Fall 1991

This *EAP* completes our second year of publication. Please note that all subscriptions, including those of EDRA members, end with this issue. We attach a renewal form. Please respond to this sheet and return it as soon as possible. Note that, because of increasing costs, we have raised the 1992 subscription to \$6 (\$8, foreign).

This year, as last, we wish to thank readers for helping *EAP* to continue. Without your interest, support, and contributions, there could be no newsletter. So far, expenses and subscriptions, contributions and available space, have balanced nicely, and we have been surprised and pleased at the way each issue seems to assemble itself and make a whole whose parts have coherence.

This issue of *EAP* is a case in point. Its three longer features—a book review, conference report, and short essay—all speak to the controversial phenomenological question of whether there are certain underlying qualities of human experience and the built world that might provide direction for a more vital and humane environmental design.

In *The Good House*, reviewed in this issue, architects Max Jacobson, Murray Silverstein, and Barbara Winslow answer this question affirmatively by using the theme of *contrast* as a design tool. They explore how opposites like inside and outside, exposed and tempered, up and down, and light and dark are often hallmarks of successful architecture. Using house design as their focus, the authors demonstrate how

A drawing from *The Good House* that illustrates contrast in the painted teepee of the Blackfoot Indians. "The black area at the bottom is the earth, and the larger black area at the top is the heavens (with dots of white stars and a striped rainbow). The structural poles themselves link the earth and heavens, acting as the paths for[human] prayers, ascending to the spirits" (p. ii).

the theme of contrast might provide a creative conceptual trigger. The illustrations in this issue of *EAP* are from Jacobson, Silverstein, and Winslow's book.

We also present in this issue a report on a special session, "Phenomenology, Architecture, and the Lifeworld," held in April at the annual meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture in Washington, D.C. We reprint the abstracts of the four presentations, which argued for and against the possibility of general existential themes that might provide design guidance and architectural understanding. We also publish the session commentary given by philosopher Karsten Harries, who has written some of the most penetrating discussion on the links among dwelling, building, and human meaning.



We conclude with a short essay by Kansas State University graduate student Yuan Lin, who uses Harries' work—in particular, his theme of *natural symbols*—to examine Frank Lloyd Wright's image of the ideal house. Lin wrote this essay as one assignment for David Seamon's spring 1991 KSU seminar on "Environmental Aesthetics." The drawing of Wright's *Falling Water* on page 14 is also by Lin.

As always, we request your contributions, including work from students and news of events, publications, organizations, and so forth. We also hope that, on your renewal form, you will list friends and colleagues whom you think might enjoy *EAP*. We will send them a complimentary copy.

## EVENTS, PUBLICATIONS, & PROGRAMS

**Avoiding the Anyplace Syndrome**, a workshop "for planning a sense of place," will be held 25-28 February, 1992, in Boulder, Colorado. Presented by the Colorado Chapter of the American Planning Association, workshop leaders will include architect Spiro Kostof, landscape architect Michael Hough, and landscape scholar J. B. Jackson.

The prospectus says in part: "Can we save or recapture a community's sense of place? What are the components which create a sense of place? Are there practical tools which a community can bring to bear to identify, maintain, preserve or enhance its sense of place?" For further information, contact: Ed Moore, Planning Division, 500 E. 3rd Street, Loveland, CO 80537 (303-667-6130).

**Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly**, a "voice of humanistic science," is concerned with the question of "what it means to be human." It seeks essays, fiction and poems from anthropologists and other interested parties who explore this question in various qualitative ways. For further information, write: John O. Stewart, Editor, English Department, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210-1361.

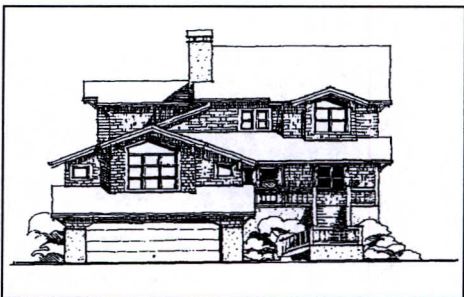
The **Center for Respect of Life and Environment** promotes efforts that support "the life and beauty of planet Earth" and "the integrity and future of Nature's Creation." An affiliate of the Humane Society of the United States, the organization emphasizes four priorities: Strengthening an ecological spirituality; Building sustainable communities; Protecting and

appreciating wild and sacred places; and "Greening" academic disciplines and professional practice.

One project of the group is to build the St. Francis Animal Sanctuary in Assisi, Italy, a major historic center of the Christian world and home of St. Francis, who regarded animals as "our brothers and sisters." This sanctuary is envisioned to become a major center "from which to disseminate the St. Francis' ecumenical message of respect and reverence for all life." Address: 2100 L Street NW, Washington, D. C. 20037.

The **Sacred Sites International Foundation** seeks to understand, preserve, and protect natural and built environments throughout the world that have spiritual significance. SSIF publishes the newsletter, *Site Saver*. One of SSIF's aims is a computer database registry of the world's sacred places, with supporting archival materials. Those *EAP* readers aware of such sites and wishing to nominate them, should send the name, nearest settlement or landmark, state, country, and so forth, to SSIF.

For some *EAP* readers, such formalization of place may seem "unphenomenological," but we must all realize that sacred sites are being destroyed at an alarming rate. Any protective efforts are important and to be lauded and assisted. Address: SSIF, 1332A Walnut Street, #330, Berkeley, CA 94709-1405 (415-540-0671).



A residential design from *The Good House* (see p. 6).



## CITATIONS RECEIVED

Margaret Boschetti, 1990. Reflections on Home: Implications for Housing Design for Elderly Persons. *Housing and Society*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 57-65.

This article is a qualitative study of older people's experiences and feelings in regard to home environments across the life span. Twelve retired persons were interviewed in depth and asked, for example, "When you think back over all the places you have lived in your life..., are there any that seem to stand out as being more important than others, places you really loved?"

Evelyn Martin, 1991. Between Heaven and Earth, *Planning*, January.

This planner describes one Native American tribe's efforts to press for recognition of the spirit of place. The focus is Arizona's Mount Graham, part of the Coronado National Forest and also a sacred place for the Apache Indians, who believe the land should serve a higher purpose than that required by modern needs—in this case, a site for building seven giant telescopes. The article includes a review of Native-American sacred sites in the United States and legal efforts to protect these places.

Leo Zonn, 1990. *Place Images in Media: Portrayal, Experience, and Meaning*. Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN 0-8476-7594-7.

Twelve essays that examine the meaning of place in media that include painting, photography, music, film, and maps. Articles that *EAP* readers might find especially interesting include Mona Damosh's "Those 'Sudden Peaks that Scrape the Sky': The Changing Imagery of New York's First Skyscrapers" (chapter 2); David Seamon's "Awareness and Reunion: A Phenomenology of the Person-World Relationship as Portrayed in the New York Photographs of André Kertész" (3); Janice Monk and Vera Norwood's "(Re)membering the Australian City: Urban Landscapes in Women's Fiction" (6); Robin Doughty's "Nature Writing and Environmental Experience" (7); and Louis Woods and Charles Gritzner's "'A Million Miles to the City': Country Music's Sacred and Profane Images of Place" (12).

David Stewart & Algis Mickunas, 1990. *Exploring Phenomenology: A Guide to the Field and Its Literature*, 2nd edition. Athens: Ohio University Press.

First published in 1974, this book is one of the clearest and most gentle introductions to phenomenology, written for "the nonspecialist and for the generally educated reader who wants to know more about phenomenology" (p. vii). This new edition includes a 14-page supplement that emphasizes developments in hermeneutics and in the relation between philosophy and the

social sciences. One of the most readable books available to help students understand the phenomenological and related reflexive traditions.

## NOTEWORTHY PUBLICATIONS

Corner, James, 1990. A Discourse on Theory I: "Sounding the Depths"—Origins, Theory, and Representation. *Landscape Journal*, 9 (fall):61-78.

This landscape architect explores the historical and philosophical bases for the difficult tension in environmental design between theory and practice. Corner argues that designed environments today are "efficient, practical for the user, and aesthetically pleasing, yet often strangely empty, without depth, mystery, or qualities of anything other" (p. 75). To revitalize the built environment, he emphasizes the importance of symbols that, when they are genuine, "relate the finite and mutable to the immutable and eternal, lived reality to ideas" (p. 77).

Though emphasizing landscape architecture, Corner's conclusion has significance for all scholars and practitioners who seek to premise thinking and design on a phenomenological sensibility:

As the great mediator between nature and culture, landscape architecture has a profound role to play in the reconstitution of meaning and value in our relations with Earth. The poetics of human dwelling, the very consciousness of humanity, might once again become the central focus of attention for landscape architectural theory. By its nature, this insight is primarily grounded in perception and cannot exist outside the a priori of the human body and its engagement with the world. Landscape architectural theory ought therefore to find its basis in the realm of perception and the phenomenological, the essential origins of existential meaning (p. 77).

*Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 1990, vol. 8, 373 pp. (Edmonton: University of Alberta, Faculty of Education).

The latest volume of this Canadian journal, now published once a year, offers several articles relevant to environmental experience and phenomenological method. In "Nature Experience of 8-to-12-Year-Old Children," Marjan Margadant-van Archen concludes that a more successful environmental education for children, rather than emphasizing a reductionist, objectivist approach to nature, would better take "children's nature experience seriously" and design

study programs that incorporate "the myths and magic around plants and animals and start... lessons with these stories" (p. 92). She concludes:

...by having children explore their immediate environment, we avoid presenting them with an alienating scientific perspective on nature. Instead, we work with the natural world that they experience daily. By doing so, we teach children and ourselves to reflect on our symbiotic relationship with the environment. Instead of maintaining a senseless dichotomy in our approach to nature, with esthetic nature appraisal on the one hand and scientific technological nature control on the other, we will learn how to regain an inhabitable world (p. 94).

Three articles in this volume of *Phenomenology + Pedagogy* deal with the experience of home and aloneness: Stephen Shaw's "Returning Home," Christine Norris's "Stories of Paradise: What Is Home When We Have Left It," and Anne Winning's "Homesickness." These three articles are useful contributions to the phenomenological literature on dwelling and journey. Shaw's essay is particularly powerful in its striking firsthand description and thoughtful phenomenological explication of a return visit to a home place and family that he has not seen for some twenty years. He asks what it is to:

experience returning to the community of one's family? What is it like, after an absence of many years, to journey back to the family of one's birth and the home one left? One way *return* can be interpreted is as a re-turn. It is in this form, in the sense of going back to, a re-currence, a re-viewing, and a re-making that I will endeavor to examine the implications and perhaps the ground of the question (p. 225).

Also in this volume of *Phenomenology + Pedagogy* is Robert Burch's "Phenomenology, Lived Experience: Taking a Measure of the Topic," the second essay in a three-part series that provides a conceptual justification for phenomenological investigation. As with the first essay in this series (see *EAP*, spring 1990), Burch writes clearly and convincingly. His justification of the seemingly-redundant phenomenological phrase "lived experience" is effective, and his effort to harmonize the difficult phenomenological tension between individual self and world beyond is powerful. He writes:

Though as a self, a human being has reference to itself essentially, it is, as human, also implicated essentially in a

reality that is 'other'. On this reading, then, phenomenology is not so Cartesian as to absolutize self-consciousness in such a way as to presume to gather everything of experience reflectively and without essential remainder into fully self-transparent *prise de conscience*. Yet neither is it so 'deconstructive' as to absolutize contexts of meaning in such a way as to dissolve all selfhood (and hence all reflexivity, intention, authorship and factuality) into an anonymous play of signifiers. Between self-consciousness and the truth of lived experience, phenomenology recognizes both a difference and a priority, and it lives with that tension (p. 156).

Zimmerman, Michael E., 1990. *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. ISBN 0-253-20558-1, soft cover, \$18.95.

Of the many recent publications discussing Martin Heidegger's relationship with Nazism, this philosopher's two-part volume probes the furthest and seeks a balance between blame and understanding. Zimmerman focuses on Heidegger's account of modern technology, which he believed did not simply involve technical knowledge or machinery but, rather, a particular way of working with and revealing things—as raw material to promote greater and greater power.

In part one of his book, Zimmerman places Heidegger's critique of technology in the social, economic, and political context of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. In part two, Zimmerman examines Heidegger's changing efforts to devise an alternative to the manipulative, power-based metaphysics of modern technology. Zimmerman includes Marxist and feminist critiques of Heidegger's philosophy and concludes that Heidegger made irresponsible political and ethical mistakes from which we, now inundated in the technological world that Heidegger predicted, can learn valuable moral and practical lessons. Zimmerman writes:

Half a century ago, Heidegger faced the complex crisis of how to endure the end of an old world and how to assist in the advent of a new one. Despite the fact that Western people have now moved into the technological world which Heidegger envisioned and at first resisted, we share an aspect of Heidegger's own crisis, namely, how to define and to promote human well-being in the embrace of a technocratic economic system which seems to promote a new version of recollectivization by standardizing "experience" (patterns of consumption), homogenizing culture, colonizing leisure time,



and excluding difference. We can learn from Heidegger's meditation on modern technology, even if what we learn is simply that there are political perils associated with attempts to found a post-technological world. In important respects, his question remains our own: can we develop the non-absolutist, non-foundational categories necessary to assess, to confront, and to transform the technological and economic mobilization of humanity and the earth at the beginning of the twenty-first century?" (pp. 273-274).

#### Zimmerman's hopeful vision:

*In my view, if humankind is both to achieve liberation from various kinds of political, social, cultural, and economic oppression, and to avoid destroying the ecosphere by nuclear war or by industrial pollution, new narratives are needed which delineate and celebrate the differences inherent in a multi-voiced humanity, which attempt both to define and to protect the "rights" and "interests" that are arguably common to the great majority of humans at this point in history, which encourage the development of communities that do not involve regression to collectivist practices or attitudes, which develop an alternative to the dissociative and anthropocentric attitude toward nature and the human body, and which emphasize the importance of modes of reasoning other than instrumental-scientific without at the same time denigrating the latter. While these new narratives would celebrate diversity, they would possibly discover elements of a common narrative in the one now being developed by post-modern scientists, who have replaced the mechanist model of nature with one that emphasizes nature's capacity to develop novelty, complexity, uniqueness, and freedom (pp. 272-273).*

## MEMBERSHIP NEWS

Justin Winkler, professor at the *Geographisches Institut, Universität Basel*, Basel, Switzerland, relays the following conference description, with the hope of informing EAP readers as to "what is happening in Europe with respect to phenomenological approaches in the environmental disciplines." He writes: "A symposium on 'Philosophy of Aesthetics' was held at Rudolf Steiner's 'Glashaus' in Dornach, Switzerland, 11-12 May 1991. The main topics were aspects of A. G. Baumgarten's work on a fundamental aesthetics (*cognitio sensitiva*) and existential

philosopher Heinrich Barth's approach to aesthetic phenomena. Participants were from the fields of philosophy, biology, geography, architecture, landscape design, and Goethean natural science. Discussion is on-going." For further information on this symposium, contact: Prof. Rudolf Bind, Hohle Gasse 7, 4143 Dornach, Switzerland.

Richard Capobianco, a philosopher at Stonehill College, writes: "The notes and articles in the Newsletter are exceptionally thoughtful and engaging.... I have to admit that I am strongly inclined to the classical ideal that you espouse, and I have to agree that there is something not quite right in wishing to 'feel out of place' in one's architectural lifeworld. And yet, it seems to me that contemporary architecture must, somehow, reflect the contemporary Zeitgeist, or at least the more positive aspects of the contemporary Zeitgeist. Much of what the deconstructionists are up to strikes me as existentially false--and yet not completely because they are trying to express architecturally some of the genuine insights into the human condition especially emphasized in this century: the richness of a multitude of voices, a multitude of perspectives, a multitude of paths; the beauty of the unique, the singular, the strange; the comedy of the absurd; the exhilaration inherent in growth, movement, and change; the pleasure in being purpose-lessly!"

"For every truth, an untruth; and our contemporary world surely also reflects the downside of these insights. But I guess the question for me is: How can these important truths about our being-in-the-world be 'built into' place even as we remain mindful of the 'positive' qualities that [EAP more often emphasizes]. Perhaps we are not that far apart, after all?" Address: Philosophy Department, Stonehill College, North Easton, MA 02357.

Ralph Acampora is a graduate student in philosophy at Emory University in Atlanta. His academic and activist interest relates to what he calls "trans-human axiology"--"moral, political, and aesthetic values with respect to other animals and the environment (especially eco-ethics and animal rights)." His dissertation will focus on Nietzsche's treatment of human animality. Address: 1041 St. Charles Ave. NE, Apt. A, Atlanta, GA. 30306.

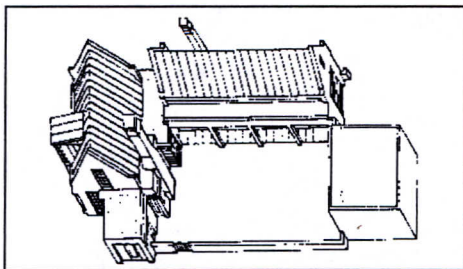
## WHAT IS A GOOD HOUSE? CONTRAST, EXPERIENCE, AND ARCHITECTURE

Max Jacobson, Murray Silverstein, and Barbara Winslow, 1990. *The Good House: Contrast as a Design Tool*, Newtown, CT: Taunton Press. ISBN 0-942391-95-5, \$21.95 hardcover.

The three architect-authors of this book seek to understand and to provide design strategies for houses that evoke experiences of satisfaction, attachment, pleasure, and joy. What is it about a house, ask the authors, "that makes it a good place to be in--supportive, vibrant, and appealing to both the intellect and the senses?" (p. vii).

For architectural phenomenology, *The Good House* is significant because the authors argue that successful home-design strategies regularly involve variations on one central theme--the *expression of contrast*. As the authors explain,

Strong design seems to grow from elements in a state of contrast at all scales. From the overall shape of a building down to the details of trim, a good house is composed of sharply contrasting qualities, all working together. For example, to create a room that is light and expansive, also create (to some degree) its opposite, a place that is dark and enclosed. And then link the two. Likewise, to experience warmth we need the cold: to experience order we need mystery. Good design, in these terms, is the production of harmony through the orchestration of strong contrasts (p. ix).



A Bernard Maybeck house used to illustrate the windblown/still contrast.

To demonstrate the significance of contrast in house design, the authors break their book into two major parts. The first section, called "Theory," introduces the theme of contrast in general terms and presents, chapter by chapter, a set of design strategies grounded in six specific contrasts: *in-*

*side/outside, exposed/tempered, up/down, something/nothing, light/dark, and order/mystery.*

The second section of the book, "Practice," seeks to demonstrate the theme of contrast concretely by examining several specific houses that "succeed in being strong and memorable" (p. viii). Nine of these houses the authors have designed themselves in their 16 years of architectural practice. In addition, the authors interpret four other houses: the Noyes House, by Eliot Noyes, 1955; the Hamdy House, by Abdel Wahed El-Wakil, 1978; the Schneider House, by Bernard Maybeck, 1907; and the Havens House, by Harwell Hamilton Harris, 1939. The authors justify the selection of these four houses because they involve a range of climates, styles and complexity of program; and because the authors believe that the houses are "fascinating buildings from which there is much to learn" (p. 78).

### ELEMENTS OF CONTRAST

In developing the importance of contrast in house design, the authors argue that there are two underlying commonalities that run throughout the specific contrasts and houses presented. The first commonality is that the good house is full of contrasts in regard to "every dimension of perception and measurement":

You can walk through a building and simply notice that, as you descend two steps into the living area, you go from a small, low ceilinged space to a larger, higher space; that you move from a dark interior to a lighter window bay. As you continue out to a more open and cooler yard, you'll notice the changing, contrasting qualities. The good house provides both warm and cool, high and low, dark and light, large and small (p. 4).

The second commonality is the fact that the opposing ends of the contrast are brought together by some architectural element that serves to enrich the contrast:

It's not just that there is a large room as well as a small one, but that they are linked by special doors in a way that enables



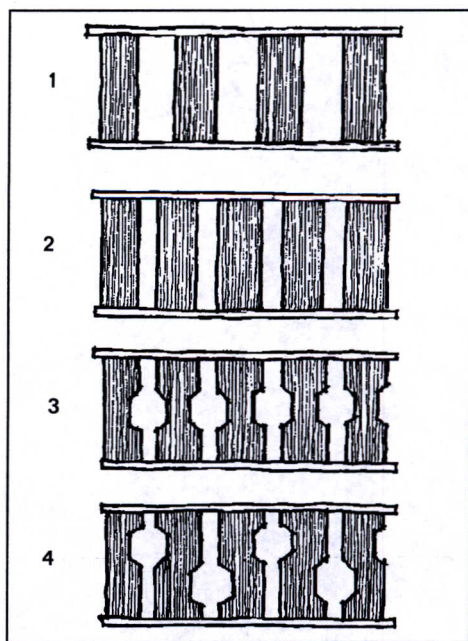
both to be experienced together. An interior is linked to its exterior by a covered porch that allows you to experience in and out simultaneously. Or the private upstairs rooms are linked to the public downstairs rooms by a balcony that enables the children upstairs to spy on the evening conversation of the adults below. Notice that in all these cases the connecting link between the contrasting pairs is itself an architectural element--the doors, the porch, the balcony--and that it serves not to dull the contrast but to enliven it (p. 5)

The authors use these two commonalities as the organizational device for presenting the six specific contrasts mentioned above. First, the authors consider how the contrast expresses itself in the environment and what design strategies can enhance it; second, the authors identify a range of design strategies whereby the connecting link can contribute to this enhancement (see figure, right, for one example).

In regard to inside/outside, for instance, the authors first seek to show that this dialectic is perhaps the most important architectural contrast because the task of an environmental designer is almost always to create some sort of interior in the midst of an exterior. Next, the authors suggest four strategies for strengthening insideness and outsideness. For example, to heighten insideness, the designer might: (1) increase the concavity of the space; (2) define its corners and edges; (3) increase opacity; and (4) decrease the size of the space and provide access through a series of transitional spaces.

The authors then present several architectural strategies for linking inside and outside in a contrasting whole. These possibilities include: (1) inside standing alone in a field of outside; (2) inside cradling outside; (3) inside and outside interlocking; (4) inside enfronting outside; (5) axes of symmetry; (6) in-between places; (7) interpenetration; and (8) intermixing of elements.

In their last theoretical chapter, "The Contrasting Whole," the authors emphasize that all the six contrasts discussed separately are, in fact, usually interrelated. For example, *up* is often linked to light and exposure, while *in* may be related to shelter and order. Clearly, however, there will be exceptions and variations. In addition, various combinations of these qualities may support and be expressed through particular architectural archetypes, thus one can speak of the building foundation that is short, thick,



The authors provide the above drawings to illustrate the use of the something/nothing contrast in designing a deck railing: (1) create contrast between boards and spaces between; (2) make the spaces narrower than the boards to enhance their contrast; (3) join the contrasts together with a new part--in this case, a hexagonal shape; (4) contrast shapes by alternating their position through the contrast of up/down.

heavy, and hard; or the north side that is shady, cool, low, and blank; or the library that is dim, warm, ordered and full of rich detail (p. 72).

The central design implication is not the development of some set of ironclad rules that require particular contrasts to be present always together but, rather, the recognition that "the dimensions of contrast within some part of a building can either cooperate and reinforce each other, or they can fight each other" (p. 72). The authors conclude that when the many different aspects of contrast are integrated in a thoughtful and sensitive way, the resulting design is more likely to be "poetic, resonating with many overtones of harmony" (p. 73).

## TEACHING, DESIGN, AND THEORY

*The Good House* should be a useful classroom text, both in design studios and theory courses, particularly for lower-level students. The theme of contrast is simple, yet the authors convincingly demonstrate how its many different manifestations can provide a useful language for describing architectural and environmental experiences.

Especially for beginning students, these experiences are often visceral, intuitive, and difficult to describe in words. *The Good House* provides one framework for giving shape and structure to these experiences. In this sense, the book provides one conceptual underpinning for students' speaking about and directing their design work.

If the book offers an ordered relationship between understanding and designing, it is also useful because the authors seek to translate this relationship into concrete design strategies, though several of the explanations seem truncated and, especially for beginners, not as clear or as usable as they might be.

The authors' interpretation of specific house designs is, overall, more convincing, particularly the authors' discussion of how they drew upon contrast in their own residential designs. These interpretive examples should suggest possibilities for students as they design their own houses or evaluate others.

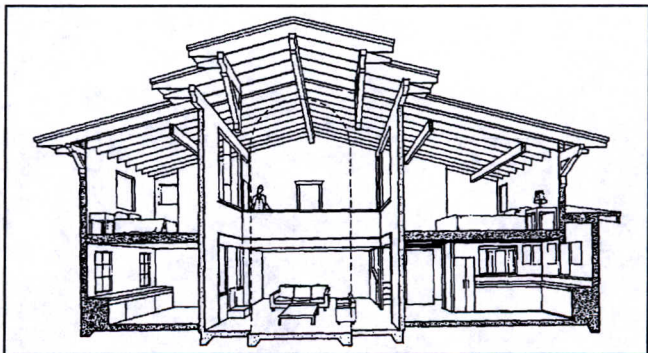
For environmental and architectural phenomenology, *The Good House* is important because it demonstrates how underlying experiential commonalities can provide innovative conceptual and design insights in regard to the built environment. The authors recognize the ambiguity of architectural contrast and its enormous range of combinations and differing expressions as shaped by culture, history,

individual creativity, and geographical environment. Yet the authors also demonstrate that contrast-as-experienced cuts beneath these many sorts of differences and provides a legitimate independent focus for exploring architectural and environmental experience.

As architects, the authors emphasize the practical design value of contrast. The book, therefore, is not rigorous academically and, in this sense, is only a short start toward a phenomenology of contrast-as-experienced and what its many existential dimensions reveal about architectural and environmental meaning.

In this regard, particularly in theory courses, the book would be usefully presented alongside other

work of similar aim and expression—for example, Thomas Thiis-Evensen's *Archetypes in Architecture*, Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness*, Lisa Hes-chong's *Thermal Delight in Architecture*, and Christopher Alexander's *Pattern Language*. All of



An interior view of one house designed by the authors; contrasts used include openness to nature vs. secrecy from the city.

these authors believe that an empathetic explication of underlying, common patterns might offer a revitalizing new way to see, understand and design. These books support, echo, and extend the argument of *The Good House*, which, in turn, offers the same reciprocity to them.

As with the synergy of contrasts that makes a whole greater than the parts, so is the case with the growing number of qualitative studies that, gathered together and shown to speak to the same interpretive whole, might eventually lead to a thorough and groundbreaking phenomenology of architecture, place, and environment.

D. Seamon



# PHENOMENOLOGY, ARCHITECTURE, AND THE LIFEWORLD: A CONFERENCE REPORT

*Editors' note: The 79th annual meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture was held in Washington, D.C., 6-9 April. The theme of the conference was Back...to...Life, and over 60 papers were presented. One session at the conference was devoted entirely to "Phenomenology, Architecture and the Lifeworld," and we highlight that session in this issue of EAP. Moderator of the session was Kay Bea Jones, Architecture, Ohio State University; and commentator, Karsten Harries, Philosophy, Yale University. The four presenters were Cynthia Jara, Robert Mugerauer, Nicholas Salmon, and David Seamon. First, we reprint the abstracts of the four papers, in order of presentation, and then present Harries' commentary.*

*For EAP readers who would like to study the conference presentations in full, they are published in: John Hancock & William Miller, eds. Architecture: Back...to...Life (Washington, D. C.: ACSA Press, 1991). We publish Harries' commentary here for the first time and are grateful for his willingness to share his thoughts with EAP readers.*

## Toward a Phenomenology of the Architectural Lifeworld

David Seamon, Architecture, Kansas State University

This presentation examines how the work of Karsten Harries, Thomas Thiis-Evensen, and Christopher Alexander contributes to a phenomenological understanding of the architectural lifeworld. Using stairs as an architectural focus, the paper emphasizes the existential significance of the built environment and concludes that the three thinkers' writings contribute to an experiential understanding of architecture, especially in regard to design education.

## A Phenomenology of Midwestern Porches

Robert Mugerauer, Architecture & Planning, University of Texas, Austin

What would a phenomenological approach say about the midwestern porch as a distinctive element of an American architectural vocabulary and about architecture as opening for world?

The physical and cultural meanings of the porch are partly grounded in the manner by which it relates the house to the natural environment, especially to the weather. The porch provides refuge from frequent showers and relief from overheated interior rooms in summer's oppressive heat.

The porch, as a mediating place between house and exterior, seems simple yet reverberates with levels of meaning and implications. Since it functions to shelter by holding out undesirable forms of weather or by opening up to moderating breezes, the architect seeks a porch design that will decidedly "express its purpose."

The porch can be dramatic, even in modest form. The hood unifies the porch's physical and symbolic dimensions and demarcates a physical space beneath. The porch establishes a distinctive built place in the landscape. In time, the porch may become more elaborate, both materially and culturally.

## Does Life Take Only Place? Questions for Phenomenologists of House and Home

Nicholas P. Salmon, Architecture, Montana State University

Can the human need for dwelling only be supported by forms and organizational concepts from the past which make distinctions between space and place? This question is employed as a means of examining several phenomenological studies of architecture which conclude that certain essential conditions can be discovered through experiences of the environment when approached in a phenomenological, rather than an abstract, or scientific manner.

The result of limiting phenomenological inquiries to experiential, rather than critical, explorations of the built environment has led to the suggestion that architectural forms and organizations from the past support human dwelling better than modern and contemporary organizations of form and space. Therefore, contributions to the discourse of architectural theory made by phenomenologists have been largely poetic and historical accounts of buildings from the past. This investigation represents a search for a critical voice for architectural phenomenologists, and a more inclusive application of phenomenological concepts in architectural theory.

## Thinking Like the Greeks? The Importance of Being Present

Cynthia Jara, Architecture, University of Minnesota

*A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.*

—Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*

To understand what Heidegger means by the term "presencing," it is useful to pursue his reference to the Greek sensibility of presencing within a boundary. This may be done by studying a bounded Greek site, or temenos, such as the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi.

Karsten Harries  
Philosophy Department  
Yale University

## 1

In his paper, David Seamon tells us that "from the vantage point of existential phenomenology, the lifeworld is the taken-for-granted context and tenor of everyday life." Seamon describes the "architectural lifeworld," in turn, as "the physical and spatial context of rooms, buildings, and open spaces among buildings, in which human experience occurs."

I have to confess that such appeals to the lifeworld make me a bit uneasy, especially when they are supported with references to my own work, for example, to my appeal to what I have called *natural symbols*. As Heidegger insisted, and as I think we have to insist, the everyday lifeworld is inevitably shaped, and perhaps misshaped by history. In an obvious sense, our lifeworld is not that of the Greeks, or of the Middle Ages; nor is it that of a South American peasant. And, as so many have insisted, especially phenomenologists, the shape of our lifeworld cannot and should not be accepted as something that simply has to be. Is life in that world life as it should be? Does it not invite, even demand, critique?

This, of course, raises the question of where such critique is to find its criteria. Surely not in a simple appeal to that world in which we find ourselves first of all and most of the time, for isn't it precisely this world that has invited critique by those who charge that the shape of our modern world has covered up what is essential? Should we then appeal to some "essential existential qualities" rooted in what one is tempted to call the essential lifeworld, buried beneath the world we live in first of all and most of the time? Norberg-Schulz thus invites us to return from the technological world to a more original dwelling, to a more primordial, more essential understanding of the world, where Heidegger provides suggestive pointers. But at this point, we have to ask to what extent this supposedly essential lifeworld is a construct, supported by dissatisfaction with our lifeworld, supported in turn by a particular and questionable ideological stance.

I think we have to admit that the phenomenologist's lifeworld, just like Laugier's description of the state of nature, is inevitably a precarious construction, colored by cultural and personal prejudice. We cannot appeal to the lifeworld as to a firm ground. This, however, is not to say that constructions of the lifeworld are therefore altogether arbitrary. They would be so if there were not some tension in our lives between the world we actually find ourselves in and the world in which we would like to find ourselves, between our everyday reality and more immediately experienced claims that will not be silenced. To sum up: *I take history too seriously to be able to appeal to the lifeworld as to a readily available ground.*

And what I have just said about the lifeworld must be repeated with respect to *natural symbols*, which are inevitably mediated by particular histories and landscapes. To be sure, I also want to insist that we are not so immersed in our historical situation that we cannot criticize aspects of it by appealing to aspects of human nature, including deep-rooted needs and desires that have changed little if at all in the course of recorded history. This gives a limited validity to appeals to human nature, or to natural symbols, or to architectural archetypes.

But again, one should not expect too much from such appeals. To speak, for example, of the natural language of vertical and horizontal is not yet to say anything about how these symbols should be weighted. Should we, for example, strive for a balance between the two or let one speak more strongly than the other? And granted that narrow stairs carry different connotations than wide stairs, or that steep stairs often suggest struggle, as Seamon points out in regard to his discussion of Thies-Evensen's work. Even so, the appeal to natural symbols by itself, while perhaps illuminating, will never prove sufficient to argue for the look of a particular set of stairs. Inevitably such determinations presuppose particular contexts and different and changing ideals of communal dwelling. Such ideals find no adequate



ground in appeals to the lifeworld. We must take care not to elevate the lifeworld into something like a timeless essence not subject to challenge.

2

In his paper, Robert Mugerauer asks what "a phenomenological approach would say about the midwestern porch as a distinctive element of an American architectural vocabulary and about architecture as opening for world?" The very formulation of this question recognizes the need to relate what we can call the language of porches, not just to such broad distinctions as that of inner and outer, but to a very specific history and geography, to a quite specific ideal of human dwelling. His analysis of the porch as a semi-private space recognizes the way these porches connote particular ways of relating the house to nature and, especially, to society. Mugerauer thus emphasizes the porch's fundamentally democratic mode of dwelling.

3

That phenomenology should not embalm past conventions by elevating them into universal condition or "essences" is one claim made by Nicolas P. Salmon in his paper. Salmon is right to be suspicious of appeals to essences. In this connection, he also makes reference to my own appeal to natural symbols. To clarify that appeal let me restate once more my basic point: I do, indeed, want to argue that *the language of architecture has its ground in our being in the world*, where we have to recognize that the world in which we find ourselves is *inevitably historical*.

But it is not equally historical in all its aspects. We have to recognize the many different strands or themes that make up our being in the world, some of quite recent origin, others as old as humanity as we know it. To give just one example, when we read the *Odyssey*, we find passages that present themselves to us as belonging to a world that is long past and irrecoverably lost to us, while others seem quite contemporary.

The same is true of our experience of architecture. There is a sense in which a Greek temple or a Gothic cathedral belong to a world that has perished. But this is not to say that their architecture—for example, the temple's fluted columns or the cathedral's diapha-

nous walls—speak to us only of what has perished. There is a sense in which this architecture continues to speak to us with an immediacy that justifies talk of natural symbols.

Not that I think that the appeal to natural symbols can ever tell us how we should build. It can, however, help to make our building more thoughtful, somewhat in the same way as in Salmon's suggestion that the poetry of Heidegger's description of a Black Forest House should not mislead us. As I have pointed out in a number of places, the world presupposed by such building not only lies behind us, but we cannot responsibly wish for its return. One does, indeed, meet in Heidegger's work with a conservative, romantic critique of modernity that invites the celebration of such images. But authenticity today demands a yes to the still uncertain promise of our future, and that includes a more wholehearted yes to technology than allowed by Heidegger's own broken "yes" and "no."

4

In her paper, Cynthia Jara returns to the Greek temple, although unlike Heidegger, who does not identify the temple that figures so prominently in his essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art." Jara proposes to speak of the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, where Vincent Scully proves a helpful guide. The pilgrim's passage at Delphi is then compared to a modern Pilgrim's progress to and into the Villa Savoye and again to an imaginary pilgrimage and the differing goals. Such comparison leads to the question as to "whether both Loos and Le Corbusier, as modern designers, did not intuitively experience presencing simply as a modern imperative in their work."

I would suggest that what is here called *presencing* is a long recognized, constitutive character of all works of art, although usually it has not been discussed in terms of presencing. For what does Jara mean by presencing? She suggests that it can be described as "a heightened awareness of the human condition that goes beyond merely existing." In this connection, she appeals to the idea of *re-presentation*, which she relates to the *bounding of the site*. As I suggested in the presentation I gave earlier this morning, the idea of re-presentation is, indeed, closely related to that of *framing*. The framed is re-

presented. Re-presentation renders visible: it lets the framed presence, if you wish. Or, to use a different language, frames establish psychical distance, which has long been discussed as a defining characteristic of our experience of the art work. There is, then, a sense in which the appeal to presencing is just another way of *underscoring the art character of genuine architecture*.

Are we here "Thinking Like the Greeks"? I suspect that Heidegger is right when he insists that, more completely than the Black Forest House, the Greek temple lies behind us. For us the temple no longer lets the gods be present; for us it has lost its world-establishing power. Today architecture no longer holds the significance that Heidegger claims it held for the Greeks or for those who built Chartres Cathedral. This undeniable loss must be acknowledged and considered in all its ambiguity.

To be sure, as suggested before, to point out that the Greek world has perished is not to say that the temple no longer speaks to us at all. It still bounds its site and, bounding its site, re-presents earth and sky, and in its ruined state, also the passage of time, gesturing towards a world that has passed. Thus the temple still speaks to us and that it does is testimony to the power of re-presentation and to what I have called natural symbols.

## 5

To conclude: let me confess to a certain uneasiness with the very idea of a phenomenology of architecture, an uneasiness grounded in questions concerning the phenomenological project. Classical phenomenology aimed at the establishment of a firm ground. But, as I said earlier, we should be suspicious of appeals to essences or nature, especially in discussions of dwelling and building. They are never simply read off the things themselves, but as Heidegger recognized, receive their direction from a particular ethical stance. Appeals to the lifeworld are inevitably colored by particular ideals of dwelling. In this sense they are never altogether free from prejudice. Phenomenology will never be pure enough.

From this I do not conclude that appeals to nature or essences are therefore pointless. They are unavoidable given attempts to justify a particular practice such as a particular way of building. But by

admitting that concepts like nature or essence never provide more than regulative ideals, that they fail to provide an unshakable ground, we open phenomenology to continuous challenge and critique and do justice to Heidegger's insight that authentic thinking and dwelling never finds itself on firm ground, is always underway, a journeying entangled in history and based on inevitably precarious and creative interpretations of what matters. *To deny all appeals to nature in the name of convention is to leap over human reality as it has evolved. To appeal to nature as a ground that assigns us our place is to sacrifice the future to the past, freedom to necessity.*

*Philosopher Karsten Harries' work holds a central place in phenomenological and hermeneutical research on architecture and environment. Here, we provide a list--by no means complete--of some of his articles most directly relevant to topics covered by EAP:*

- Fundamental Ontology and the Search for Man's Place. In M. Murray (Ed.), *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.
- Building and the Terror of Time. *Perspecta*, 19 (1982), 58-69.
- Thoughts on a Non-Arbitrary Architecture. *Perspecta*, 20 (1983), 9-20.
- On Truth and Lie in Architecture, *Via* 7 (1984), 47-57.
- Space, Place, and Ethos, *artibus et historiae*, 9, (1984), 159-165.
- The Ethical Function of Architecture. In D. Ihde & H. J. Silverman (Eds.), *Descriptions*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985.
- Modernity's Bad Conscience, *AA Files*, 10 (Autumn, 1985), 53-60.
- Philosophy and the Task of Architecture. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 40 (1987), 29-30.
- Representation and Re-presentation in Architecture, *Via* 9 (1988), 13-25.
- The Voices of Space, *Center*, 4 (1988), 34-49.
- Theatricality and Re-presentation, *Perspecta*, 26 (1991), 21-40.



# KARSTEN HARRIES' NATURAL SYMBOLS AND FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S NATURAL HOUSES

Yuan Lin

In "Thoughts on a Non-Arbitrary Architecture," Karsten Harries speaks of a rediscovery of a language of natural symbols. This language might help create buildings that "are experienced as necessary rather than arbitrary" (1983, p. 18). These natural symbols, says Harries, "can be derived simply from an analysis of man's being in the world. They are not tied to a particular culture or region" (p.17).

In fact, these symbols are said to express the essential patterns of human existence in the world--up/down, front/back, left/right, dark/light, and so forth. Though these symbols are highly related to our everyday life, they are somewhat intangible in architecture. It is difficult to imagine an architecture that expresses these experienced qualities without using specific materials and forms. As Harries emphasizes, this vocabulary of natural symbols is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the creation of buildings that are non-arbitrary (p. 18).

Harries' article leaves us with several questions that relate to this considerable gap between a vocabulary of natural symbols and real architecture. For example, what does a non-arbitrary architecture speaking with natural symbols look like? Are there any modern buildings that might be related to a non-arbitrary architecture? Is there any way to bridge the gap between meaning and material expression and thereby achieve a non-arbitrary architecture?

As I study Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings, I become more and more aware that the uniqueness of his architecture lies largely in its expression and interpretation of nature and people's existence in the world. One can say that natural symbols are the basic vocabulary of Wright's language of organic architecture, especially in his house designs.

In this essay, I seek to present Wright's philosophy of house design in relation to Harries' theory of natural symbols and non-arbitrary architecture. I seek to demonstrate that Wright's "natural house" is one way to achieve a non-arbitrary architecture. Especially, I draw on *The Natural House*, written by Wright in 1954 and providing a detailed picture of his philosophy of house design.

## ARCHITECTURE AS MEANINGFUL ORDER

A key task of architecture, says Harries, is "interpreting the world as a meaningful order in which the individual can find his place in the midst of nature and community" (Harries, 1983, p. 16). Harries also argues that "the less nature and culture determine what we have to be, the greater our freedom; the greater also the dread of arbitrariness" (ibid., p.11).

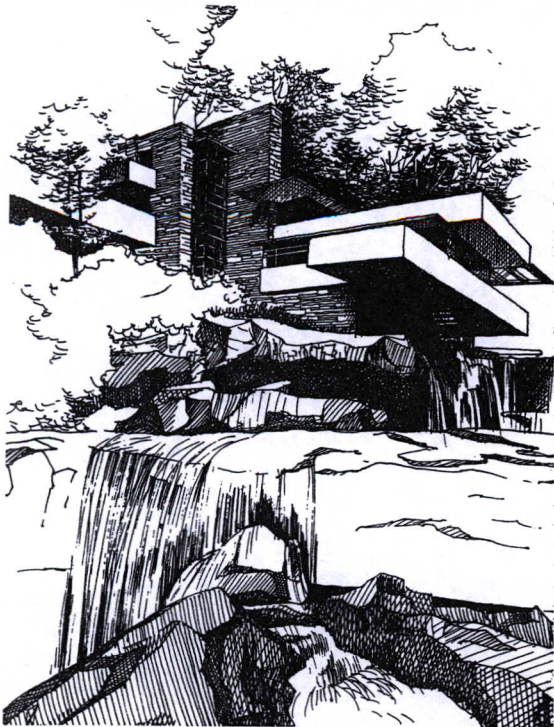
These two statements indicate that, for Harries, architecture--or more precisely, a *non-arbitrary architecture*--is an expression of a certain order. In turn, this order involves two elements--*nature* and *culture*--that mark the essence of human life. Arbitrary architecture is accompanied by a certain freedom from these two elements, while non-arbitrary architecture is constrained by them in some way.

Wright, like Harries, also refers to architecture as an expression and interpretation of the essence of human life. Wright always sought to find the inherent reality of a certain structure, and this reality is what he called a *natural law*. Wright believed that both the starting point as well as the end of this natural law is *nature*. In regard to house design, for example, he says that a dwelling should express

a natural performance, one that is integral to site, integral to environment, integral to the life of the inhabitants. A house integral with the nature of material...all the elements of the environment go into and throughout the house (Wright, 1954, p. 134).

This statement suggests that, for Wright, the first way to express natural symbols that support dwelling is by integrating the house with site, which is literally the *root* of any particular shelter. Wright insisted that people should live close to nature. In this regard, he designed his houses to be inseparable from the landscape and the topographic feature of the site.

Perhaps he best achieved this groundedness in Falling Water, a house in which one sees nothing but the firm "root" of the dwelling. The stone chimneys and walls are vertically anchored to the rocks and point toward the sky. One also sees that the building's



horizontal spaces project outward in three directions to receive the gifts of nature.

In these architectural gestures, the inside of the house flows toward the outside, and the outside penetrates inwardly. This fusion of inside and outside through the architectural expressions of verticality and horizontality best expresses Wright's idea that people should live with nature.

Wright's second consideration concerning the natural house is his belief that nature offers a reservoir of exemplary architectural forms and relationships. In other words, nature is a "practical school in which a sense of proportion may be cultivated" (Wright, 1955, p. 23). As one sees in *Falling Water*, the hard square rocks provide the original forms for the rectangular terraces and chimneys of the house. These forms are so naturally born from and attached to the physical environment that they become an inseparable part. In other words, they are not added to the site arbitrarily but, rather, grow with it and gain their being *exactly through* these natural forms.

Third, Wright insisted on a particular way of using materials: that they should be allowed to be themselves. He tried to see brick as brick, wood as wood—to see all things honestly as themselves. He never covered natural materials with extraneous color, since he believed that such artificial hues did not belong to the inherent qualities of the original materials. Further, he sought to use local materials as much as possible so that the houses had a sense of belonging to the site (Twombly, 1979, p.309).

In his *Pew House*, for example, Wright used wooden balconies to echo the surrounding woods. In *Falling Water*, he employed concrete slabs to express respect for the rocky site. These considerations allowed his houses to have a physical, material bond with the earth. In this sense, the houses have deep roots into the ground and convey stability, strength and security—all important qualities of the human need to dwell.

Fourth, Wright emphasized the relationship of the house to the natural climate, which is an integral part of the natural environment in which people live. Whenever possible, he faced his houses south to provide a natural heat and light and thereby provide residents with more direct bodily contact with nature.

His decisions in regard to the use of particular architectural expressions are also bound to local weather requirements. One example is his *Walker House*, which he called a "cabin on the rocks." Here, he used a large window surface rather than small window holes to join the house visually with the sea and to allow for ventilation and light. The glass wall became a permeable membrane to adjust the relationship between inside and outside and between human life and the world of weather.

## THE QUESTION OF CULTURE

The above four considerations demonstrate how Wright's natural house design is bounded by *nature*. His architectural expressions are so deeply and harmoniously rooted in the natural environment that one can hardly question their necessity and appropriateness.

But what of the cultural dimension of Wright's natural house? His residential designs were mostly for upper- and middle-class American families—



teachers, professors, doctors, rich businessman, and so forth. Later in his life, Wright realized that the many different "individuals" for whom he designed were the center of his houses. He insisted that there should be as many different kinds of houses as there were different kinds of people. He sought in his house designs to express the wills of these many different individuals who carry on the culture of their time and society. Wright hoped to articulate this culture architecturally and to suggest improvements through a better built world.

Wright considered American culture as fragmented "cash-and-carry" salesmanship and boosterism (Twombly, 1979, p.323). One way to shift the selfish materialism of American society, Wright believed, was to model human life after nature,

where everything took its proper place, nothing was superfluous, structure was absolutely harmonious, yet where each component asserted individuality, namely, self-expression within an all-encompassing unity (Wright, quoted in Twombly, 1979, p. 332).

In other words, Wright sought to substitute nature for culture. He believed that culture might be realized by calling for a learning from nature. In this sense, one can argue that, for Wright, the inherent structure of architectural reality is that *nature and culture should be one*. Tightly bound to nature, his natural houses would also, therefore, reflect an ideal model of culture.

In fact, Wright was so interested in Oriental culture that he admitted that his organic architecture looked more Eastern than Western (Wright, 1954, p. 218). It also appears that Wright's understanding of the architectural inside/outside relationship was derived from the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, who was perhaps the first thinker to realize the importance of the "within" of a building:

We turn clay to make a vessel; but it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends. We pierce doors and windows to make a house; and it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends. Therefore, just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the usefulness of what is not (Lao Tzu, quoted in Waley, 1956, p. 155).

Wright came to believe that the spirit of Oriental architecture--the great sense of shelter enclosing the

"inside," and the close relation with nature from inside out--describes an essential architectural truth. This spirit encouraged him in his search for a natural expression in his house designs.

In this sense, the cultural dimension of Wright's architecture is not limited to a particular place, time, or society. Instead, he believed that a design in tune with culture is an understanding of the whole natural world grounded in how human beings live. His preference for Oriental philosophy and architecture was not a fashionable interest in stylistic novelty but, rather, a deep and genuine concern the truth of architecture itself. He concluded that "it is true that the wiser, older civilizations of the world had a quiescent sense of [the truth of architecture] long before we of the West came to it" (Wright, 1954, p. 219). In this way, the more nature-bound Oriental culture became a foundation for Wright's vision of modern Western culture and architecture.

## CONCLUSION

In Wright's houses, one does not find literal translations of symbols of the past--what Harries calls "conventional symbols," that is, meanings derived from handed-down historical and cultural traditions. Instead, Wright's natural houses, involve the riches of nature--forms, materials, structures, sounds, and the unity of human life and the natural world. This architectural experience is not grounded in any specific time or place. Rather, this quality is linked to the shared qualities of human existence.

The architectural expressions of Wright's houses are timeless and full of life. These built qualities are necessary and could not readily be otherwise. One can conclude that, if Harries interpreted Wright's "natural houses," he would more than likely suggest that they are one example of a non-arbitrary architecture. These houses are one powerful expression of natural symbols brought down to earth through vision and design in tune with human dwelling.

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