



# Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology

Vol. 26 • No. 3

ISSN 1083-9194

[www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/EAP.html](http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/EAP.html)

Fall • 2015

## Last paper issue! Libraries, please take note.

As the headline proclaims, this is the last paper issue of *EAP*. Once we went open-source digitally with the fall 2014 issue, our paper subscriptions plummeted. Mostly, the only remaining subscribers were institutional libraries. The additional effort to produce paper copies is substantial and expensive, especially as we have moved toward color. We have therefore decided to end paper copies entirely. See p. 2 for an editorial *EAP* editor **David Seamon** has written on this matter.

Please, all library subscribers, cancel your *EAP* subscriptions so that we are not burdened with repeated renewal requests from the impersonal, for-profit subscriber services that most institutional libraries use today.

This *EAP* includes “items of interest,” “citations received,” and a “book note” on architects **Alban Janson** and **Florian Tigges’s** 2014 *Fundamental Concepts of Architecture: The Vocabulary of Spatial Situations*.

Also included in this *EAP* issue are two feature essays, the first by architect **Randy Sovich**, who discusses the existential significance of doors and thresholds, particularly as they are encountered by residents in congregate living situations. He argues for the design value of “placing images and personal articles at the entrance to a resident’s room to trigger his or her memory and identity of ownership.”

In the second essay this issue, environmental educator **John Cameron** writes his

tenth “Letter from Far South.” Continuing his focus on “looking and seeing” highlighted in earlier letters, he recounts a series of recent eye operations and what they have meant in terms of how visually and experientially he encounters the world.

As mentioned in the spring issue, there will be a special session devoted to “25 years of *EAP*” at the annual meeting of the **International Association for Environmental Philosophy** (IAEP). More information is provided below.

### EAP session at IAEP, Atlanta

The 19<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the **International Association for Environmental Philosophy** (IAEP) will be held October 11–12, 2015, in Atlanta. The conference follows the annual meetings of the **Society for Existential and Phenomenological Philosophy** (SPEP); and the **Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences** (SPHS). On Sunday afternoon, October 11, there will be a special session on “25 Years of *EAP*.” Participants include **William Edelglass**, Marlboro College, Marlboro, VT; **Dylan Trigg**, University of Memphis; **Robert Mugerauer**, University of Washington, Seattle, and *EAP* co-founder; and **David Seamon**, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, and *EAP* co-founder and editor. This special session has been organized by philosopher and IAEP Co-Director **Steven Vogel**. We thank him for bringing this special attention to *EAP*. [www.spep.org/](http://www.spep.org/); <http://sphs.info/>; <http://environmentalphilosophy.org/>.



Left: Coastal scene, Bruny Island, Tasmania. Photograph by **Vicki King**. See **John Cameron’s** “Letter from Far South,” p. 10.

## Editorial: Open access?

As *EAP* editor, I am of two minds about its demise as paper copy. My formative intellectual life (1966–1977) assumed paper books, paper articles, and physical libraries that required long, tedious hours of tracking down references, locating them on library shelves, and requesting paper copies via interlibrary loan. Just as today, information was available but not accessible with the ease the internet now provides.

In one sense, because of the time, physical effort, and dedication required for locating information, students had to be more devoted to their subject. I remember several of my fellow graduate students leaving our doctoral program, simply because they did not have the patience, determination, or will to master the “locating-information” stage. Today the digital world largely eliminates this demanding stage, and the result sometimes is graduate students who have not really engaged with or mastered their field of interest, perhaps partly because it has “come to them” so easily.

On one hand, the convenience of today’s digital accessibility is a boon in that I can mostly find the materials I need quickly, bringing them on-screen almost instantly. Just as significantly, I am able to discover a much wider range of resources and locate the work of researchers I would probably not know of otherwise.

On the other hand, this easy wealth of information means that I often feel overwhelmed by the superabundance of material I discover. I also note how many of my students, their powers of intellectual and emotional discrimination not yet fully formed, draw on weak or questionable information when researching and writing.

What does digital access mean for *EAP*? As I’ve mentioned in past issues, the number of individuals who have made contact with the publication has exponentially increased since open source, at least if “hits” are used as an indicator. For example, I have posted all issues of *EAP* on academia.edu, which claims to be the premier “open-source” digital site featuring academic work and said to have over 23 million registered users. As of this writing (July 18, 2015), the spring 2015 *EAP* issue has been “hit” 825 times; the winter 2015 issue, 1,339 times; and the special 25<sup>th</sup>-anniversary issue, fall 2014, 1,720 times. Do

these “hits” mean reading issues or engaging with their content? I have no idea, though, in perusing hits for earlier *EAP* volumes, I note that the counts range from 13 (vol. 7, 1996) to 156 (vol. 1, 1990) to 582 (vol. 24, 2013). This considerable range in “hits” suggests that would-be readers are searching for specific topics and content and are therefore more likely to actually locate and study entries.

Whatever the actual digital readership of *EAP*, what is most encouraging to me is the fact that *EAP*’s phenomenological perspective on environmental and architectural concerns is freely available to anyone interested enough to do a search. Obviously, many such searches involve titillation and no follow through, but others may be grounded in an incipient good faith that might blossom into sincere interest and significant conceptual and practical efforts. Just as importantly, the digital realm is valuable for *EAP* because it assists with one of the original aims of the publication: to draw together people unknown to each other but interested in the broad topic of environmental, architectural, and place experience and meaning.

As a final point, I want to mention that a good number of academic publications claiming “open access,” are not. For example, most peer-reviewed academic journals are still controlled by huge publishing conglomerates like Elsevier and Springer that makes millions of dollars in profit annually. For most of the material housed by these large publishing firms, one faces a “pay wall.” In other words, a fee—usually exorbitant—is charged to receive a PDF of the article or book that the researcher wishes to examine.

Most of the time, this fee is no problem for individuals with formal institutional affiliation that has paid a blanket fee for institutional access. For independent researchers and other interested parties, however, these fees typically mean lack of availability. In this sense, “open source” is anything but.

Even for academic publications that claim to be “open source,” it is important to know that many are “free” only because the author (or his or her institution) has paid a “publishing” fee so that the entry is now publically available. I just had this experience personally: A 2,500-word article I wrote based on a conference presentation

is to be published in a respected peer-reviewed, “open-access” journal. To make sure, however, that my article would actually be open access and available to everyone, I had to agree to pay a “publishing” fee of \$3,000 (that is not a typo!). Obviously, I declined the invitation, though now sadly any independent researcher interested in my article will need to pay a hugely over-priced access fee of \$39.95. In short, much of so-called “open access” is neither accessible nor free.

Coincidentally, I read this morning a *Guardian* article by economics reporter **Paul Mason**, who places, in a much broader societal context, what perhaps free, open-source digital *EAP*s contribute to on a much smaller scale. I reproduce four relevant paragraphs in the sidebar below; these ideas are drawn from Mason’s just-published *Postcapitalism* (Allen Lane, 2015).

—David Seamon

### “Information wants to be free”

For the past 25 years, economics has been wrestling with this problem: All mainstream economics proceeds from a condition of scarcity, yet the most dynamic force in our modern world [i.e., information] is abundant and, as hippy genius Stewart Brand once put it, “wants to be free.”

There is, alongside the world of monopolised information and surveillance created by corporations and governments, a different dynamic growing up around information: information as a social good, free at the point of use, incapable of being owned or exploited or priced.

The main contradiction today is between the possibility of free, abundant goods and information; and a system of monopolies, banks and governments trying to keep things private, scarce and commercial.

Everything comes down to the struggle between the network and the hierarchy: between old forms of society molded around capitalism and new forms of society that prefigure what comes next.

—Paul Mason, “The End of Capitalism Has Begun,” *The Guardian*, July 17, 2015

## Dalibor Vesely (1934–2015)

Born in Czechoslovakia in 1934, 79-year-old architectural historian and theorist **Dalibor Vesely** died of a heart attack in London on March 31.

Vesely played a major role in introducing phenomenology and hermeneutics to architecture and architectural theory. In his early career, he taught at the University of Essex and the Architectural Association in London. From 1978 to the present, he was a faculty in the Department of Architecture at the University of Cambridge where he co-founded a M.Phil. degree in the history and philosophy of architecture.

Vesely is best known for his *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* (MIT Press, 2004) and for many articles arguing for the importance of a phenomenological perspective in architecture and architectural thinking.

## Items of Interest

*Ambiances* is the identifying title of the *International Journal of the Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Space*. The editors are planning a special fall 2016 issue of the journal focusing on “Ambience and the history of architecture: the built environment in our sensory experience and imagination.” Contact the editors for further information. <http://ambiances.revues.org/>

*Atmospheric Spaces* is a website providing information on research, design, and other venues dealing with “atmosphere”—the ineffable presence of surroundings intimated by descriptors like “ambience,” “vibrations,” “feelings,” and “spirit of place.” The site is maintained by philosopher of aesthetics **Tonino Griffero**, Professor at the University of Rome, Tor Vergata (note his book entitled *Atmospheres* in “citations received” below). [www.atmosphericspaces.wordpress.com/](http://www.atmosphericspaces.wordpress.com/)

## Citations Received

**Jo Ann Asher Thomas and Nancy H. Blossom, 2015.** *The Handbook of Interior Design*. Oxford: Wiley.

The 31 chapters of this edited volume aim to “present a detailed overview of current research and critical thinking” in interior

design and interior architecture. Some of the chapters relevant to *EAP* topics include: “An Overview of Phenomenology for the Design Disciplines” (**David Wang**); “Toward a Creative Ecology of Workplace Design” (**Margaret Portillo** and **Jason Meneely**); “Healthy Interiors for the Visually Impaired” (**Dak Kopec**); “Interior People Places: The Impact of the Built Environment on the Third Place Experience” (**Dana Vaux**); “The Phenomenological Contribution to Interior Design Education and Research: Place, Environmental Embodiment, and Architectural Sustenance” (**David Seamon**).

**Rachel E. Black, 2012.** *Porta Palazzo: The Anthropology of an Italian Market*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.

This anthropologist provides an ethnographic study of Turin, Italy’s Porta Palazzo, said to be “the largest open-air market in Europe” and which the author frequented, worked in, and studied for some seven years. She writes: “I did not really find my place in the market until I got behind a market stall and climbed onto the vendor’s platform. My field work... consisted of working with a number of individuals and families from different ethnic backgrounds, as well as doing my daily shopping at the market, for a year. I tried to cover as much of the market as possible. Porta Palazzo is broken up into four main sectors: the big resellers’ market, the farmers’ market, the fish market, and the clothing market.... My research focused on the areas of Porta Palazzo where food is sold in open-air settings, a mammoth task given the size of the retail area and the number of vendors in and around the market square.”

**Christian Borch, ed., 2014.** *Architectural Atmospheres: On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*. Basel: Birkhäuser.

This edited collection’s three chapters by architectural theorist **Juhani Pallasmaa**, philosopher **Gernot Böhme**, and political sociologist **Christian Borch** were originally presentations at the 2011 Copenhagen conference, “Atmospheres, Architecture, and Urban Space.” The three contribu-

tors emphasize “architectural atmospheres,” defined by Böhme as “spaces with a mood, or emotionally felt spaces” (p. 96).

In his chapter, Pallasmaa criticizes contemporary architects’ emphasis on vision, form, and buildings as elegant photographs. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard, he suggests that “The atmosphere of a setting is often generated by a strong presence of materiality.... [Bachelard] suggests that images arising from matter project deeper and more profound experiences than images arising from form. Matter evokes unconscious images and emotions, but modernity... has been primarily concerned with form” (p. 35).

Contending that a key aspect of atmosphere is that “the totality dominates the detail” (p. 30), Pallasmaa cites Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “My perception is not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being...” (p. 34). In relation to architecture, Pallasmaa concludes that “in the near future we will be more interested in atmospheres than individual expressive forms.”

A significant volume for phenomenologists attempting to locate and describe such less effable phenomena as place character, environmental ambience, sense of place, *genius loci*, and placed embodiment. In the sidebar, below, we reproduce architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa’s explication of “atmosphere.”

## “Having a feeling about it...”

The character of a space or place is not merely a visual quality, as is usually assumed. The judgement of environmental character is a complex fusion of countless factors that are immediately and synthetically grasped as an overall atmosphere, feeling, mood, or ambience. “I enter a building, see a room, and—in a fraction of a second—have this feeling about it,” confesses Peter Zumthor, one of the architects to have acknowledged the importance of architectural atmospheres....

Permit me already at this early stage [in this chapter] to suggest a definition for experiential atmosphere: Atmosphere is the overarching perceptual, sensory, and emotive impression of a space, setting, or social situation. It provides the unifying coherence and

character for a room, space, place and landscape.... It is “the common denominator,” “the colouring,” or “the feel” of the experiential situation. Atmosphere is... an experiential property or characteristic that is suspended between the object and the subject (Juhanni Pallasmaa, pp. 19–21).

**Matthew Carmona, ed., 2015. *Explorations in Urban Design: An Urban Design Research Primer*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.**

This volume includes the work of 32 urban researchers in the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London, including articles by faculty in Bartlett’s “space syntax” unit. Contributors include **Filip Wunderlich** (“Place-Temporality and Rhythmicity”); **Sam Griffiths** (“Space Syntax as Interdisciplinary Urban Design Pedagogy”); **Quentin Stevens** (“Public Space as Lived”); and **Kayvan Karimi** and **Laura Vaughan** (“An Evidence-Based Approach to Designing New Cities: the English New Towns Revisited”).

**Madalina Diaconu, Eva Heuberger, Ruth Mateus-Berr, and Lukas Marcel Vosciky, eds., 2011. *Senses and the City: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Urban Sensesapes*. Munich: Lit Verlag.**

The 17 chapters of this edited collection focus largely on urban tactility and olfaction—two sensory modalities conventionally considered to be “secondary” or “lower” and thus supposed “unable to produce autonomous forms of art, unworthy of being cultivated, object of numerous social prohibitions, and of suppressing strategies in modern architecture and city planning.” Chapters include: “Matter, Movement, Memory” (**M. Diaconu**); “Haptic and Olfactory Design Quality of Viennese Coffeehouses” (**R. Mateus-Berr**); “Selfhood and the World: Lived Space, Vision and Hapticity” (**J. Pallasmaa**); “Vienna: Sensory Capital” (**D. Howes**); & “Sense, Scent and (Urban) Sensibility” (**R. Bendix**).

**Tonino Griffero, 2014. *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate**

[originally published in Italian as *Atmosferologia: Estetica degli spazi emozionali*, Rome: Gius. Laterz & Figli, 2010].

This Italian philosopher works to “address the theory of atmospheres in a thorough and systematic way. The role of atmospheres in daily life is examined and their main ontological and phenomenological characteristics are defined. Providing a history of the term ‘atmosphere’ and of its conceptual forerunners (*genius loci*, *aura*, *Stimmung*, numinous, emotional design and ambience), Griffero develops a philosophical approach that finds patterns in the emotional tones of different spaces, addresses their impact on the felt body, and argues that there is a need for non-psychological rethinking of emotions.” See the sidebar below.

### Spatial extra-dimensionality

[A]tmospheres are spatialised feelings: that is to say, they are the specific emotional quality of a given ‘lived space’. By this concept... we here mean... the space we experience in the lifeworld and to which plane geometry turns out to be completely blind.

For instance, geometry is incapable of justifying the (not only metaphorical) volume of a Sunday silence or the narrowness of a living room (perhaps metrically identical to another which is yet perceived as more spacious); the enormous difference between the space filled with directional saliences where the dancer moves and the [opposite situation] of someone crossing the same ball room for no reason; the different length of a journey for someone who strolls casually and someone with a precise destination in mind, but also... for those who leave and those who return.

This very extra-dimensional and non-epistemic sense of space brings a fundamental contraposition to light. While physical space, made of places and physical distances, enjoys an abstract uniformity (isotropy and Euclidean three-dimensionality), ‘lived’ space claims to have an absoluteness and an irreversibility tied to the felt-body (above/below, right/left, up/down) and to our actions.... (Griffero, pp. 36–37).

**Paul Knox, 2012. *Palimpsests: Biographies of 50 City Districts*. Basel: Birkhäuser.**

This architect pairs 50 urban-district types with 50 real-world examples—e.g., Belgravia, London, as an “elite district”; Encino, California, as a “sitcom suburb”; Kentlands, Maryland, as a “neo-traditional subdivision”; La Défense, Paris, as an “office district”; Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin, as a “gentrified district”; and so forth. For each, Knox provides a brief geography, history, color photographs, and maps.

**Louise A. Mozingo, 2011. *Pastoral Capitalism: A History of Suburban Corporate Landscapes*. Cambridge: MIT Press.**

This landscape architect examines “how business appropriated the pastoral landscape.” She argues that the American suburban corporate landscape can be identified in terms of three subtypes: the corporate campus, the corporate estate, and the office park. Company headquarters she considers include Bell Labs, General Motors, Deere & Company, and Microsoft. Mozingo argues that, “even as it is proliferating, pastoral capitalism needs redesign... for pressing social, cultural, political, and environmental reasons.”

**Jay M. Price, 2013. *Temples of a Modern God: Religious Architecture in Postwar America*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.**

This historian studies American religious architecture in the postwar period and considers how a movement of “denominational architectural bureaus, freelance consultants, architects, professional and religious organizations, religious building journals, professional conferences, artistic studios, and specialized businesses came to have profound influence on the nature of sacred space. Debates over architectural style coincided with equally significant changes in worship practice” and “suburbanization and the baby boom required a new type of worship facility...”

**Sarah Robinson and Juhani Pallasmaa, eds., 2015. *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment,***

**and the Future of Design.** Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Originally presented as papers at a symposium, “Minding Design: Neuroscience, Design Education, and the Imagination,” held at Arizona’s Taliesin West campus of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture, these 12 chapters explore the relationship between architecture and neuroscientific research. The highly debateable claim is that neuroscience “can offer compelling insights into the ways our buildings shape our interactions with the world.” Contributors include: **Mark L. Johnson** (“The Embodied Meaning of Architecture”); **Juhani Pallasmaa** (“Body, Mind, and Imagination: The Mental Essence of Architecture”); **Iain McGilchrist** (“Tending to the World”); and **Melissa Farling** (“From Intuition to Immersion: Architecture and Neuroscience”).

Following are passages from psychiatrist **Iain McGilchrist’s** chapter, which expresses a skepticism of neuroscience research in general and of its uncertain value for design theory and practice.

### **“You cannot get beyond experience”**

Many scientists assume that describing something at the brain level reveals the ultimate truth about its nature. However, . . . nothing can ever be *reduced* to anything: It is what it is. People got terribly excited when neuroscientists found a brain circuit that “lit up” when you fell in love. . . . We were invited to think that this brain activity told us something about the business of falling in love. . . . Of course, it has done nothing of the kind; something is bound to be going on in the brain when we do anything—or nothing—at all. . . .

So, although it may be important to strive to understand the brain, it is even more important to understand that the brain is embodied, and embedded in culture, as are we. What you know through your experience as ar-

chitects cannot be improved by learning about the brain function associated with it. . . . You cannot get beyond experience—and in experience we are all, literally, the “experts” . . . .

Twentieth-century art, with many very noble exceptions, has tended to trivialize what art does and turn it into a clever intellectual game, rather than something that deeply engages us and moves us to see things that we would not otherwise see. . . .

[In the same way], architecture has become too academic. When you think of many of the great architects of the past, such as Christopher Wren and Nicholas Hawksmoor, they were primarily stonemasons. Architectural schools as we know them did not yet exist. These were stonemasons who knew their craft and their materials, possessed an intuitive sense of proportion, and knew the ancients. They read the works of Vitruvius, but their emphasis was not on abstract theory; their approach was embodied. . . .

When I entered the pavilion at Taliesin West, I noticed Lao Tzu’s saying that the reality of the building is the space inside to be lived in. I would like to tweak the translation: the reality of the building is the space inside to be “lived,” rather than “lived in.” Standing in a great Greek temple, in a Renaissance church by one of the masters, one feels a depth, an unobtrusive simplicity, a sense of spaces calling out and answering one another.

I remember as a teenager in Florence going into the church of Santo Spirito and being unable to leave it: every day I had to return. Yet photograph the space and you can hardly see what is so special about it. It looks austere, even simple. But there is something about the feeling of the body in that space that expands the soul, the spirit, the heart, the mind, and one’s physical senses. This is, I think, the signature of a great work of art. . . .

Interestingly, after Brunelleschi left the building of San Lorenzo to work

elsewhere, its ground plan, which had been almost identical to that of Santo Spirito, was subtly altered. The original plan was not followed precisely, so the proportions changed. Perhaps that is why I have never found San Lorenzo in any way as captivating as Santo Spirito. . . .

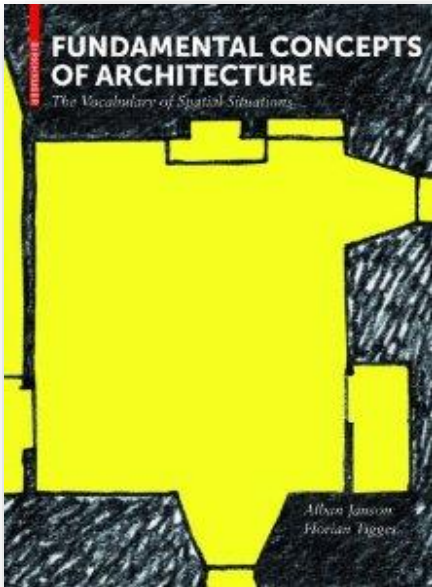
Later in my life, almost in spite of my better judgment, I came face to face with Balthasar Neumann’s late baroque masterpiece, the *Vierzehnheiligen* in Bavaria. There is no way you can capture what this building feels like from the eye. You need to be in it. I was prepared to be enraptured by all sorts of details because it is a singularly ornate church, but in fact the most surprising things about it is the calm sense of unified space within it, which exerts a magnetic attraction. I tried unsuccessfully three times to leave the church before finally tearing myself away.

We instinctively feel repulsed by inhumanly smooth surfaces, rebuffed by the flatness that is present in so much architecture of the last few decades, which may have had a grand design, but is not configured to the human form. Natural materials allow us to sink in; they have a history—a history that is revealed in the coming together of space and time in the present.

Weathering, transition, decay: we need to permit them, even embrace them. They are a part of a changing world, not a perfect, static world. Unfortunately, machines like my Apple laptop only get to look scratched and dirty when time marks them. They do not get more beautiful, like the old writing desk in my study.

There is a relational, dynamic interactive understanding of space and time that we need to accept. An enclosed space can open and expand the physical sense of one’s self, not rebuff it. An enclosed time can open to eternity and expand the sense of the moment. . . . (McGilchrist, p. 99 p. 110, pp. 114–17).

Alban Janson and Florian Tigges, 2014. *Fundamental Concepts of Architecture: The Vocabulary of Spatial Situations*. Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser.



Written by two architects, this inaccurately titled book might be better called *A Dictionary of Architectural Experiences and Architectural Situations*. Its closest conceptual kin is Norwegian architect **Thomas Thiis-Evensen's** remarkable *Archetypes in Architecture* (1989), which one could argue is the first comprehensive phenomenology of architectural experience.

In that work, the author contended that the lived core of architecture is making an inside in the midst of an outside. Thiis-Evensen masterly demonstrated that the lived architectural language that he delineated—how the degree of insiderness or outsiderness is evoked via floor, wall, and roof as they express the lived qualities of motion, weight, and substance—could offer an innovative way to understand how architecture contributed to lifeworld experience.

Oddly, Janson and Tigges are unaware of Thiis-Evensen's work, which is so significant because his phenomenological structure provides an integrated means to

interrelate the many dimensions of architectural materiality into a synergistic whole of which all the architectural and lived dimensions have a fitting place and help one to understand the overall lived impact of a particular building, style, or architect.

Rather than looking at buildings as they might be pictured in an integrated way phenomenologically, Janson and Tigges identify 150 architectural topics (and there is no justification as to why these particular topics are included and others not) arranged in alphabetical order for which each is provided a short experiential description.

Under "A," for example, one finds explications of "access," "accessibility and exclusivity," "angle and corner," "appeal," "arcade," "architecture," "ascent," "atmosphere," and "axis." The longest entry in the book is "light" (7 pp.), followed by "stairs" (5 pp.), "residence" (4½ pp.), "door and gate" (4¼ pp.), and "furnishing," "image," "intermediate space," and "urban design" (all 4 pp. each). In the left margin of some entries, the authors include small black-and-white pencil drawings supposedly related to the particular term (but not discussed explicitly so that, in many cases, the significance of the drawing is unclear).

Though the conceptual grounding of the book is phenomenology, in their brief, 3-page introduction, the authors mention this philosophical tradition only in passing, writing that "The specificity of architectural situations can be grasped less through historical, technical, or planning-theoretical terminology than through the phenomenological description upon which *Fundamental Concepts in Architecture* relies."

One wishes the authors had developed this crucial connection much more thoroughly, saying more about the academic history of "architectural phenomenology" and recent efforts by such thinkers as Rachel McCann, Robert Mugerauer, Juhani Pallasmaa, Jorge Otero-Pailos, and Reza Shriazi to critique, clarify, and extend its topical and conceptual parameters.

To provide the reader with a sense of the authors' descriptive aims and style, we include, first, Janson and Tigges's explanation of the book's purpose; second two entries from *Fundamental Concepts*—"tower" and "situation."

### An experiential perspective

The specifically architectural qualities that concern us here pertain to the articulation of all conceivable spatial relationships by means of specifically architectural resources. Neither technically nor formally is the production of objects the principal task of architecture. Instead, it is charged principally with creating suitable spatial situations for lingering at various locations, for movement and action. . . .

The key consideration of architectural design is the way in which people experience the buildings that have been created for them. . . . [T]he concrete architectural phenomenon is foremost; description concentrates on the situative contents of the respective term in close connection with concrete structural-spatial form. . . .

[T]he reader is invited to examine architecture from an experiential perspective. Via observations of architectural situations in relationship to these basic concepts, the reader is offered an instrument designed to orient, hone, and expand his or her perceptions, a resource for clarifying one's own concrete experiences of architecture in relation to the terms elucidated here (Janson & Tigges, pp. 5–6).

### Tower

It is a kind of impulsion toward the heights that makes the act of climbing a tower so attractive and exhilarating. The effort and the allure of ascent as disengagement from, and leaving behind the hustle and bustle of the world and our attachment to it; the gradual

rising into the heights and the expansion of view and visible space—all are stages in an arduous journey. But they are rewarded by the sensation of freedom, of access to and enjoyment of broad, expansive views. At the same time, a latent awareness of the possibility of falling as we stand securely on a platform offers a special sensation of sublimity.

A tower is a building with great height in relation to its surface area. Its rooms, set on top of one another, are reached by climbing or by riding an elevator, and are connected to one another for this purpose by some type of vertical axis (stairs). In contrast to most multi-story buildings, the tower is dominated by verticality, and its rooms are stacked rather than being set alongside one another—in extreme instances, with a single room per story.

A visit to or residence in a tower, then, is characterized by natural lighting from all sides, and a generally unhindered 360 degree view of the surroundings, which widens the living spaces on all sides. Habitation in a tower requires a high degree of organization of everyday life, and progress from room to room always entails climbing or descending stairs. Life is divided into levels; individual activities are invested with varying degrees of priority depending on the elevation at which they are performed.

Only to a limited degree can such experiences be transferred to typical high-rises. Here, the climbing of stairs is generally replaced by travel in an elevator. With considerable building heights, the rewards of effortful ascent are supplanted by the astonishing sensation of being carried upward into unexpected heights without effort, while standing immobilized in a moving capsule. The glazed cabin of an elevator that is set in open space, on the other hand, offers the unfamiliar experience of gliding vertically through space.

The hazards and hubris of the tower construction, from the building blocks assembled by children all the way to the tower of Babylon, as well as the ambition of striving toward a summit

and the masculine symbolism of erection: all of these are characteristic of the significance of the tower as a gesture that is designed to impress. The tower is visible from afar as a legible sign of power and aggression, while the multiplication of towers in metropolises necessarily detracts from the symbolic force.

As a solitary landmark, the tower provides a point of spatial orientations within a town or landscape, sets an accent, and establishes relationships within a network of locations. But to be successful, a tower must function on two different scales, accommodating distant connections in the heights, and complex local relationships in proximity to its base (pp. 338–39).

## Situations

We experience architecture in the form of situations. The Latin term already establishes a relationship both to architecture (Latin: *situs*, constructed, providing residence or dwelling), and place (*situs* also means geographical location, area). Situations contain humans and objects; the term *architectural situation* refers mainly to occupants and their homes and rooms. The texture formed by the situative and contextual relationships that joins them is conditioned by the respective ‘situatedness’.

The way in which we experience a given situation depends substantially upon our current motivations. According to the frame of action, pertinent interests, or point of view, one and the same spatial configuration will represent very different situations; a residence may be experienced, among other things, as a building project, a home, a rental or sales object, or a work of art. We experience a situation as architectural by virtue of the way in which it noticeably shapes the spatial conditions of our movements and activities. The performative character of the situation is therefore a decisive component of the architectural concept.

However, between the diverse meanings and motives that define a situation, there generally emerge superimpositions, divergences, or interlocking structures, so that an ‘architectural situation’ mostly overlaps with other conditions that shape situations. The situation of a work station, for example, may also incorporate the situation of the view from a window, thereby bringing factors such as stimulation or distraction into play. On an urban square, the situation of a political demonstration may overlap with the situation of confinement or enclosedness of the square, in turn contributing to a heated mood and conditioning the audibility of shouted interjections.

Relevant alongside the multiplicity of intervening elements and factors when architecture is described as a situation is their performative character, which incorporates the processual and eventful qualities of the respective situation. As a rule, situations are not experienced in purely static terms, but instead through movement and active participation.

Descriptions of situations do justice to this factor only when it grasps architectural elements in relation to use, to our multifaceted intercourse with them when the relationships and positions we adopt in relation to them are taken into account, along with the gestures they evoke. Decisive in the case of a row of supports is less its form, and rather the way in which they contain us, allow us to pass through, or guide us, while, for a staircase, the experiential possibilities of ascending and descending are essential.

When architecture is registered as a holistic and integrated situation against a diffuse background of sensory stimuli, we may perceive it as an architecture image. Because we ourselves are components of this situation, however, we experience it simultaneously as a scene within which we appear before ourselves, so to speak (pp. 284–85).

# Locus of Meaning and Memory

## Notes on the Nature of Doors and Passages in Care Settings

R. M. Sovich, AIA

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*How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect. If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to reopen, one would have tell the story of one's entire life (Bachelard 1964).*

The door and threshold are as old as the first shelter. Throughout time, men and women disguised or decorated the passages into their homes to ward off danger or evil spirits and to identify themselves to friends. Iconographic sculpture, surrounding entrances to public buildings, told the story of the community to a population that could not read the written word. The door or portal was, in effect, a community history book.

Today's literate society relies on words and signs as well to signal identity and ownership. This is particularly true in congregate living situations where opportunities for individual expression and environmental cues to wayfinding are limited to very precise areas. In a typical facility, each door is fundamentally the same as the next.

The practice of placing images and personal articles at the entrance to a resident's room to trigger a resident's memory and identify ownership, now becoming quite common in assisted living, alzheimer's care, and congregate housing, is restoring an historic convention and use of the doorway as a place to tell a story.

By considering memory, perceptions, experiences, rituals, and the reintroduction of narrative or

iconographic decoration relating to doors, designers of care settings can create meaningful places that gently jog the fragile memories of the resident.

### Memory and Experience

A doorway is a place, distinct from the room or hall on either side. It may also be a place of refuge. For example, in a tornado or earthquake, people are safest in a doorway. A door presents itself as a vertical being. One experiences not only the point of contact, the doorknob, but the entire door.

One 'reads' a door with the entire body. Who has not come upon a door with a push sign when to the contrary the door and handle clearly say 'pull'. Many of us have experienced feelings of hesitation at doorways, particularly at the threshold of a patient's room.

A closed door is off putting but don't forget that a door may also be imposing or unwelcoming to someone experiencing difficulty manipulating the lockset, often the case for an elderly person with diminished wrist strength. A wide door with a glass light is welcoming, while a tall, solid

door can be imposing. A low door height, particularly in cases where one must stoop to enter, creates a very special, intimate feeling.

A large handle on a door in a child's drawing means the door is inviting. A key hole may mean the door is locked, but a locked door may also hold a mystery (Bachelard 1964). No wonder that when researchers in an alzheimer's care wing covered door handles with paper blending with the door color, patients were less likely to try to leave through that door.

### Ritual

*Numerous rites accompany passing the domestic threshold—a bow, a prostration, a pious touch of the hand, and so on. The threshold has its guardians—gods and spirits who forbid entrance both to humans and to demons and the powers of pestilence (Eliade, 1957).*

Everyone practices rituals at doorways, often without realizing it. For example, most people knock and wait for permission to enter another's room at home. Doors are the places for greetings and goodbyes. Many of the important events in life occur at the doorway. People decorate the doors to their homes to celebrate holidays or communicate life events, such as a childbirth, to the community.

Those of the Jewish faith place an object, the Mezuzah, on each doorjamb in the home to recognize the Law and Observation of God each time one passes through





a door. It is a commandment that the Mezuzah be placed on every 'post and gate'.

## Doors Tell Stories

Portals and doorways are places that historically were surrounded with iconographic sculpture that tell stories. In churches and cathedrals, bas-relief panels on the metal doors might tell the story of the history of human beings on earth, the creation myth, or the history of religion. At the French church of Saint Lazarus of Autun, the relief sculpture over the entrance tells the story of the Final Judgement.

In Baltimore's Augsburg Lutheran Home, as in many assisted-living homes, a panel next to the doors of rooms holds the resident's picture and short biography. These photographs and narratives function on several levels; First, they support the resident's memory. Second, they tell the story of that person's life to the staff and visitors, reminding them of the resident's humanity.

A casual visitor easily finds a topic to strike up a conversation with the resident based on the panel information. During a stay in a hospital or in any congregate living setting, people have a need to be seen as human, but sometimes care providers see only a disease or ailment.

The bereavement counselor at Baltimore's Joseph Richey Hospice insists volunteers knock and ask permission before entering patient rooms. "Wouldn't we knock before entering their house?" she asks.

This simple ritual of respect empowers the resident. Think of a typical hospital experience: How many of the 30 people—nurses, aides, dieticians, therapists and doctors—who enter the average patient room in a 48-hour period knock and ask permission to enter? The modern hospital is a battleground, where everyone is too busy for such antiquated rituals.

## Ceremonial Doors

In planning congregate or assisted living housing, along with the ceremonial front door for greeting guests in the lobby, create a side door or porte cochère for the residents to use regularly, just as they might



have routinely used their garage to come and go when they lived at home.

In a hospice, a door to a patient's room is not merely a product selected from a catalog or an object of particular style or finish; a door is a place of transition.

In planning, one should ask: How does a door feel to the touch, how does it create a place and how may that place affect the feelings of a person experiencing it? In some cases, this door may provide comfort for the person entering, simply by allowing a space to pause to collect one's emotions before entering. A patient may look toward that door to ease fears of abandonment or in hopes of comfort.

## Doors as Living Narrative

Narrative decoration may address the past, present, and future of a place or room. Imagine the doorway of a resident's room with attributes that speak of the life of each person who occupied that room. This door would be a living narrative connecting the lives of each successive dweller.

The attributes might simply be small, colorful, handmade ceramic tiles or carved

wood panels. Each panel could represent something significant to each individual. The effect of this informal memorial would be a comforting reminder, giving strength in the knowledge that each is not alone—that others have passed this way before.

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*Illustration, p. 8: the feeling of opening doors as people come and go in health care settings.*

*Illustration, this page: The door as living narrative.*

# “Meeting the Eye”

## Tenth Letter from Far South

John Cameron

Retired educator **John Cameron** lives on Bruny Island, just off the southeastern coast of Tasmania, the island state south of mainland Australia. His first nine “Letters from Far South” have appeared in EAP, winter and fall 2008; spring 2009; winter and fall 2010; spring 2011; winter and fall 2012; and spring 2014. [jcameronblackstone@gmail.com](mailto:jcameronblackstone@gmail.com). Text © 2015 John Cameron. Photographs by Vicki King; © 2015 Vicki King.

In the last “Letter from Far South,” I described some strange sights and shifts in my visual field, commenting that there was more than met the eye, both literally and figuratively, in the waters of Blackstone Bay. A month after I penned those words, they took on a more immediate meaning. Recent events have given me the opportunity to experience different ways of seeing more directly, and I have started retraining myself to use my eyes more effectively. As a consequence, my sense of the perceptual field in which I am immersed, visually and non-visually, has expanded.

I have been extremely short-sighted all my life. I wore corrective glasses at the age of three. By the time I was ten years old, I had a prescription in excess of ten diopters, which put me in the top one percent of myopic people. When an optometrist in San Francisco measured my uncorrected vision as greater

than 20/1000, compared with normal vision of 20/20, he told me that I qualified for California registration as legally blind, if I so wished. I declined. After all, with my trusty “specs” I was fine.

Being myopic has its advantages. With my glasses off, I have an inbuilt magnifying glass. For years, Vicki has relied on me to do up-close work such as threading needles and removing splinters.

One day after we had been at Blackstone for several years, I went down to the shore and splashed water on my face a few times. Seven times, to be precise—it’s one of my little rituals. This day I left my glasses off and allowed the seawater to dry on my face, the salt prickling my skin. I was in front of the largest sandstone cave on our shore, capable of sheltering a dozen people from the rain if needed.

I began to explore the lichen on the back wall of the cave. At a distance of two inches,

I had excellent magnified vision and a whole lichen world opened up. Rounded clumps of whitish green three to six inches in diameter covered most of the rock. In between, there were tiny balls the size of a pinhead, acidic green sprinkled over the rufous surface. Most surprisingly, there were even smaller jet-black dots, pinpricks of gleaming coal that even grew on top of other lichen species.

I was entranced and spent several minutes investigating individual sand grains and miniscule pores on the cave surface. I vowed to return regularly to this miniature world and to examine other surfaces with my glasses off.

On still summer evenings, we love to stroll along Blackstone Bay collecting driftwood for Vicki’s sculptures, picking up the rubbish on the shore, and generally “taking the air.” About a year ago, I began to feel disoriented if we stayed out until dusk. South of the “sod hut,” the beach becomes more coarsely cobbled, with a mixture of shiny black stones and dull grey dolerite. The effect is a “salt and pepper” speckling, and in low light I began to lose my depth perception on the cobbles, no longer sure of my footing. The optometrist told me that, somewhat unusually for my age, I had cataracts, which required regular monitoring. Two months later, my vision had deteriorated markedly, especially in my right eye, and surgery was needed.

The cataract operation, in which the lens of the eye is replaced by a plastic one, is normally routine and minor. In my case, though, because I was so myopic, there was some risk to the retina and the surgeon wanted a retinal specialist to examine my eyes before he proceeded. The specialist indicated that, although there was some retinal



stretching in my right eye, there was a low risk, and I certainly needed the operation soon before I lost my vision altogether from the “spectacular” cataract in the center of my eye.

These few months of investigations were unsettling times for me. Although I had never been able to take my vision for granted, successive optometrists had commented on how healthy my eyes were and how good my corrected vision was for someone so shortsighted. Now this was no longer the case and there were risks ahead. As the cataract in my right eye grew more rapidly, my world became blurrier, and I began to lose depth perception during the day as well. I could no longer make out the grey-on-grey patterns of wind and water currents on the Channel. I lost some of the confidence and ease in moving around on the land that had been such an integral part of being at Blackstone.

The ophthalmological surgeon told me that I would lose most of my myopia and might barely need corrective lenses at all, which was a welcome prospect. “You’ll also get your full color spectrum back,” he explained, which struck me oddly. “But I have full color vision now,” I protested. I could certainly make out all the gradations on Vicki’s color wheel in her studio. I secretly prided myself on my ability to distinguish faint color variations on paint charts.

I was quite conscious when I was wheeled into the operating theater, and I’m glad I didn’t miss the experience. I had no sensation that my eye was being operated on. All I could see were hazy patches of blue, green and rose merging into each other. Every so often, the color washes would shift as if a kaleidoscope had been turned. I felt as if I were immersed in an immense Mark Rothko painting, letting myself be drawn into its radiant space and soft hue gradations.

As I was drifting comfortably in the color field, it came to me that I wasn’t looking at anything. Rather, this was all happening interiorly, within my eye and brain. This is how the world would always present itself, as a play of light and color and shading, except for a few intervening factors—functioning lenses in the eye and a good eye-brain connection, but there was another influence. It seemed that I was only keeping

my normal waking world as it was through force of personality, and personality weakens over time, more frequently revealing what I was now seeing as impersonal: no objects, just world.

These recognitions cascaded rapidly through me. I was in the operating theater no more than fifteen minutes, and then I was submerged in darkness in the recovery room. After such intensity, I was grateful for the rest and stillness except for the quiet beeping of the heart monitor.

What I had just “seen” reminded me of the first time Vicki and I taught at the University of Western Sydney, when we took the “Introduction to Sense of Place” students into the Blue Mountains for a field trip. We gathered at the mouth of a delicately fluted sandstone cave overlooking a small rainforest gully. I settled the students into the place by taking them through an exploration of their sensory perceptions followed by a discussion of the geological and biological stories that presented themselves in the bushland around us.

Vicki then introduced what became known as the “soft eyes” exercise. She asked the students to convey impressions from the entire visual field in front of them with a piece of charcoal onto a page of the sketchbook sitting on their laps without looking at the paper. She encouraged them to work rapidly, to keep the charcoal moving at all times and to use it to record differences in sensations.

Perched on my pile of stones looking out onto the verdant canopy, I hesitated, silently agreeing with the student muttering, “I can’t draw,” next to me. Vicki guided us gently through it: “This isn’t art or drawing, there’s no way to do it wrongly. Let the movement be continuous from the world out there through your eyes, down your arms to the charcoal to the paper.” And indeed my drawing began to flow. The only way to do it was to let go of any notion of drawing objects and just record sensations.

Only after we had nearly finished were we allowed to glance down at the marks we had made on the page and compare what we had done with the scene in front of us. There was a chorus of gasps and murmurs. It was such a brilliant way to enter into another way of seeing place and responding to it that

it became an integral part of every subsequent excursion.

That memory of treetops and rock faces dissolving into sensations and movement seemed a prelude to what I had just experienced more viscerally in the operating theater. More visual effects were waiting for me when I stepped out into the Hobart night. The streetlights were amazing! Instead of a bright point of light at the top of a lamppost, they looked like giant luminous snowflakes half the height of the lamppost in diameter, with strong radial lines reaching out to a serrated perimeter. House lights had the appearance of the rings of Saturn, diffuse concentric colored bands. “The texture of light indeed!” I exclaimed.

Vicki drove me back to Blackstone the next day after the surgeon gave me the all-clear, and I soon had cause to reconsider my words about color perception. I stumbled out onto the veranda in raptures. My journal entry for the day was full of exclamation marks: “The color purple!!” The dark grey clouds massed over the hills above Blackstone had exquisite violet tones to them that I had never seen before.

Mount Wellington didn’t appear in its customary uniform blue haze, but had deeper, rich purple-blue hues to it. The rainbow-colored accents to the late light striking the top of the wavelets in the Channel were new as well. “It truly is a wondrous world,” I declared to Vicki. “I’ve got purple back and I never even knew it was gone.”

A similar thing happened at the other end of the spectrum a fortnight later when the cataract in my left eye was removed—a range of yellows returned. The summer grasses were no longer just ochre-colored, there was a brilliant golden cast to them.

It transpired that, for the first time since I was three, I didn’t need glasses. It was a revelation to wake up, open my eyes and see the world clearly. One of the particular pleasures had to wait until the following spring when I could go swimming again. For the first time in my life, I could see the features of the underwater world clearly. I could make out tiny fish darting for cover as I swam overhead.

The seaweed on the bottom had previously appeared as a diffuse, undifferentiated mass of vegetation, but now it resolved itself

into a forest of different plant types, from feathery fans to bulbous pods to bladed kelp. I knew some of this from the occasions I had been snorkeling, but the maximum correction on the goggles was only half my prescription strength, leaving my underwater vision blurred. It was entirely different to have clear unaided sight in the water as an everyday experience.

As I rested out in the depths on that first swim with my “new eyes,” it was a shock to find that I could now see the wooded shore and grassy hinterland plainly. It took me a while to work out why that made such a surprising difference. It brought continuity to what had previously been an experience of disconnection. I would come down to the shore with good vision, take off my glasses, and enter the blurry waterworld in which the trees on the shore were a dim and distant presence.

Now I could discern the connections—how the rock outcroppings continued under the water, how the slope of the sea floor was a function of the slope of the land. I could see Vicki on the veranda while floating in the water, and I don’t know whether I can convey to a normally-sighted person why that was disconcerting as well as illuminating. Swimming became less of an immersion experience, with less of a feeling of otherness while I was in the water.

Several months later, I was driving toward the ferry when I noticed an odd flash of light in the edge of my right eye and some large floating shapes in my field of vision. I’d been told that “flashes and floaters” were a warning sign, so I called the optometrist’s office from the ferry. Fortunately, he was available to see me that day. He had a long look at my eye through his array of lights and mirrors.

“The good news is that your retina is still intact. I can’t quite tell, but there might be small tear in the bottom right. I wouldn’t mind a second opinion.” I made an appointment to see Hobart’s first retinal specialist, who was due to start work the following Tuesday.

Unfortunately, my eye didn’t wait that long. Sitting out on the deck with friends the next morning, I suddenly realized that I couldn’t see much out of my right eye. When I closed my left eye, it looked as

though I was looking down a microscope at a slide of pond water. Slowly moving, rounded shapes filled my entire vision.

Fortunately, one of our visitors was a registered nurse and she was clear: “This is not good. Lie down and keep still. Call Emergency.” In short order Vicki packed an overnight bag and drove me to the ferry, where again I made a call to the optometrist. “Don’t go to the hospital,” he told me “You’ll sit there for hours and you need to see an eye surgeon right away. This being the New Year’s weekend, there’s only one on duty in Tasmania, up at Launceston. Come and see me and I’ll give you a referral.”

Vicki made the anxious three-hour drive to Launceston with five minutes to spare, and I was quickly booked in for surgery that evening. This time, there were no special effects, no insights into the nature of vision, just forty minutes of having to lie perfectly still while there were odd vibrating sensations in my eye to the accompaniment of clicking, whirring, and buzzing noises.

“Well, that was worth doing,” the surgeon told me cheerfully in the recovery room. “I’ve repaired a large horseshoe-shaped tear in your retina. Just as well you came up here quick smart. You can lose your sight from something like this if you leave it too long.”

He explained that he had injected a large gas bubble in the eye to “keep the wallpaper up against the wall.” My education on the physiology of the eye was being furthered. I had no idea that the retina, which is crucial for sight, is only half a millimeter thick, hence the term “wallpaper.” [1] The whole arrangement seemed so fragile. It seemed a wonder that retinas weren’t damaged more often. The glue in the surgeon’s analogy was his laser and freezing treatment, and the gas bubble applied internal pressure to keep the retina attached while it healed.

I did get to see Hobart’s new retinal specialist on the Tuesday but for a post-operative visit. He was very specific. For the next three weeks, I was to lie on my left side with eyes closed for a minimum of forty-five minutes each hour, and I was to sleep only on my left with my head elevated. I gave thanks that this had occurred in summer so that it was warm enough to lie out on the veranda all day.

Thus began a completely different way of being at Blackstone. My days on Bruny were usually physically active, and it was hard to lie still and be more receptive all the time. It was hard on Vicki as well, who suddenly had to do all the work around the house and garden that we normally shared. On the other hand, I had noted in my journal of the year before that I wanted to explore the soundscape more fully, and now I had the opportunity.

Birdsong immediately took my attention. We have noticed recently that the abundance of woodland birds has increased, possibly because their habitat in the understory is being restored. [2] I was reaping the rewards of our efforts, delighting in a richer and more varied repertoire of birdcalls. To my particular pleasure, a shrike thrush took up residence close to the house, and his clear melodious song seemed to penetrate me. As evening approached, there was a burst of chattering and twittering as thornbills, honeyeaters, and firetails clustered around the watering bowls close by. Having my eyes closed most of the time intensified and altered my hearing.

I mentioned in an earlier essay [3] that I had witnessed an experienced birder use eyes and ears in tandem to locate and identify birds. Without my vision, I began to focus less on what the birds were, and more on the qualities of the sounds themselves—how resonant, sharp or harmonious they were, and what effect they had on me.

As the days passed, I became more acutely aware of the ever-changing presence of the water. Unlike a birdcall, the sound of seawater does not emanate from a single source. Waves broke continuously down the shore across my whole aural field, evoking the feeling of being immersed wholly in my senses. At first, I was mainly conscious of deprivation—I could no longer go down to the shore, let alone swim, so my communion with the water would have to wait. I could feel the yearning in my limbs to be in the water.

As the moon attracts the sea to it in tides, so the sea in proximity pulled my body toward it. As I slipped deeper into the non-visual sensorium of the veranda world, though, I yearned less, and the soft slapping of the wavelets on the shore and the touch of the

briny air on my face was a balm. On still evenings, the rich humus of seaweed would saturate the air and slowly move upslope and enter my lungs as a tonic. Surely there could be no better place to recuperate.

I had much else to listen to. Vicki checked out some audio books from the local library, and there was our trusty wind-up radio. One day I listened to Vilayanur Ramachandran speaking on the interconnection of sight and the emotions—a fitting topic for a man in my condition, I thought.

He noted that the brain does not simply perceive an object and then respond to it. He proposed a model in which the visual center registers the presence of something different, triggering an emotional response in the limbic system to what it might be, prompting a “further search for object-like entities” and eliciting a further response. [4] This “really close wiring between the visual part of our brains and the emotional part of our brains,” as the interviewer described it, was thought to originate in camouflaged environments such as the forests in which humans evolved, where it was critical to distinguish between predator and prey. [5]

I immediately thought of my experiences during cataract surgery and the effect of the “soft eyes” exercise. If Ramachandran was correct, it was not a simple matter to train the eyes to see in a more holistic manner. Strong basic emotions linked to survival were integral to the identification of objects, which is akin to my intuition that “force of personality” constructed objects out of the visual field.

At the same time, there were strong emotions associated with non-object seeing—feelings of deep relaxation, a sense of letting go, and no longer having to react to things. It was a process of merging into the visual field, becoming part of it rather than observing it from the outside. By implication, an excursion into this way of seeing could only be undertaken where there was safety and trust.

What interests me is the synergy between the two ways of seeing. We can’t function without seeing and responding to objects that we encounter, but perhaps we can’t function fully without recognition that they, and we, are all part of the one perceived field. In turn, how we construct the objects

in our heads affects how we respond to them.

Three weeks later, feeling optimistic, I went for my checkup with the surgeon. I was beginning to see past the gas bubble in my eye and the world looked clear. He too was pleased to be able to look past the bubble into my eye now, but he didn’t like what he saw. “Unfortunately your eye hasn’t healed well after the operation. A hole has opened up in your retina, and I’m going to have operate right away.” Stunned, I gathered that I had permanently lost some of the sight in that eye, and he was now trying to save the rest of it.

I emerged from the next operation rather shaken, as it lasted two hours and I had to remain completely motionless. Without a sedative, I was acutely conscious of every movement the surgeon made as he cut out the lower part of my retina and fastened the perimeter of the remainder down with laser and freezing. This time he put a heavy oil into my eye with the instructions to sit upright during the day and sleep in an inclined position.

Another long period of lying on the veranda with my eyes closed ensued, less comfortable than before. I was constantly aware of the incision and stitches, rather like having a splinter in my eye that I couldn’t blink away. I longed to lie flat and doze since I was having trouble sleeping on a “ramp” of pillows.

My eye didn’t open for several days, but the consequences for my vision slowly emerged. Because the lens inverts images, the removal of the retina in the lower section manifested as a dark shadow over the top one-third of my right visual field. During daylight, flames of light occasionally licked around the margins of the shadow. At other times there were flickers through it like lightning through a storm cloud. [6] At dusk, the loss of peripheral vision was more evident as though I was looking through a blurry periscope.

I realized with a pang that the brief period of having good, uncorrected vision had ended. After sixty years of intense shortsightedness, I had seven months of full color, full-clarity sight. It was a shame it had lasted such a short time, but it was not so serious in the larger scheme of things.

The worse that could happen was that I would lose sight in that eye, and plenty of people get by with one functional eye. Still, the shadow over my vision quickly assumed a symbolic significance, a *memento mori*. Not so much that my life was henceforth blighted but more a visual reminder that sickness and death are real, and life is short.

After another month, the surgeon gave me the go-ahead to start moving around. I tottered down to the shore, eager for some physical contact after so long dwelling in the littoral soundscape. I bent down and let my hands rest on the choppy surface, feeling the water course around them, feeling grateful for the sustaining presence of the sea.

I murmured, “You are the water, you are the water.” I wasn’t entirely clear what I meant at first, but I kept repeating it, feeling rather foolish, fragile, and unsteady on my feet with very little depth perception. You are the water. You, the water, are a “you,” not an “it.” More than mere substance, more even than the essential material of life. You are a being to be addressed, perhaps even a “thou” in Martin Buber’s language. [7] I trailed my fingers in the seawater, wondering, listening.

The surgeon had given me a “no swimming” injunction, but I reasoned that I could at least sit in the water. The next warm day, clad in hat, sunglasses and swimming togs, I waded out to a depth of two feet and sat down. I worked out that if I leaned back on my arms, I could be immersed up to my chin, and the water would take most of my weight. My backside and heels rested gently on the sand and were rocked back and forth as the wavelets pulsed over me. Perfect! I was keeping my head up, eyes closed and relaxed as required, plus I was in the water again.

Every day I could, I returned to the shore. Once more, necessity had shown me the next step in communing with the water. Normally I swim the Australian crawl stroke, with head down and eyes open, cutting into the water with an exuberant plunge of the arm, scooping back, keeping my legs going in a scissor kick. Now I was forced to

recline, be quieter and more receptive to the sea, enabling me to submerge myself more softly and take my time about it.

What of the vague sensation of an “unspoken conversation between limbs and the enclosing brine” that I referred to in a previous essay? [8] Because my purpose was recuperation rather than recreation, my experience now

was different. The water took my weight more obviously, so I felt supported emotionally, which was reinforced by the gentle rocking motion of the waves. It was the same movement that had given rise to the lapping sound on the shore that I had found so soothing. Some days I simply had a relaxing time bathing, other days, with my eyes closed, I felt held in an intimate exchange, another expression of my newfound sense of the water as “thou.”

I noticed that every day the currents and wavelets were subtly different and moved my heels in the sand in a distinctive pattern. Sitting up straighter one hot afternoon, I looked at the furrows and arcs that my heels had carved into the sandy bottom and wondered whether this was some kind of primitive calligraphy, the marks recording our silent exchange. Was I embarking on some unplanned Goethean scientific study of the waters of Blackstone Bay?

It was an intriguing notion, but I soon dismissed it because there was no separate being to engage with, no equivalent of the scarred grasstree or the rock with the sea-green line. The bay was a seamless part of the Channel, which was a seamless part of the Tasman Sea and the Southern Ocean. There was nothing to draw, no life history of the phenomenon to visualize.

It was tempting to conclude that I was engaged in nothing more than post-operative emotionalism, but I did feel that there was something true in this process—that paying closer attention to being in and around the water was a further aspect of being in this place.



*There is something that fogs over your mind when you look too long at any one thing. Actually look, don't just park your eyes in a certain direction. [9]*

It sounds absurd to say that I needed to retrain myself in how to look, but a few attempts to follow Tart's simple instructions convinced me otherwise. My eyes were accustomed to being “parked,” and it took considerable conscious effort to shift focus every couple of seconds. When I did the exercise outside, I became far more conscious of the three-dimensional

dimensionality of the world.

The large differences in the distances from apparently adjacent objects—the Prickly Moses bush (*Acacia verticillata*) three feet away seemingly next to the White Peppermint tree (*Eucalyptus pulchella*) eighty feet away in front of Mount Wellington forty miles away—became starkly evident. It was as though I were turning the page in a children's book when the cut-out images popped out of the flat surface.

Continually shifting my focus went against the grain. It didn't help matters that depth perception was now more difficult because of my bad eye, but I could tell that I was dealing with a basic visual habit. It helped me understand the problems I'd had in learning to divide my attention between the thistles and the grasses and other visual cues near and far when I was backpack spraying. [10] I wished I had begun Tart's training when I first read the book a decade ago but, sadly, it took a trauma to my eye to make it a priority.

At first, I thought that shifting focus was contrary to the “soft eyes” exercise as well as the meditation practice of resting the eyes on the object for long periods of time. However, I soon realized that it was simply another type of training with a different purpose. Meditation is aimed at being mindful and wholly present to oneself as well as the object, the “soft eyes” exercise develops holistic, non-objective seeing, whereas continually shifting focus trains the mind to look more actively at what presents itself to the eye. All three practices are working against

Slowly I resumed everyday activities. It had been a frustrating couple of months knowing that there were acres of thistles and dock that needed spraying and young trees that needed watering, without my being able to attend to them. I still had to deal with the loss of stamina and blurry restricted vision, especially with the oil still in the eye. One sunny afternoon, we were sitting out after lunch on the veranda when Vicki exclaimed:

“Ah, there's the sea eagle!”

“What? Where?” I peered in the direction she was pointing.

“Down low over the water, I think she's fishing.”

“Ah, I'd love to see that. Where is she?”

“Halfway out to Woodcutters. Now you can see her above the trees.”

More squinting. “Nope. Sorry. Whereabouts did you say?”

“Never mind, she's gone over the headland now.”

“Oh.”

Sadly, this was a common occurrence even before I'd had eye surgery. I've always had trouble locating moving objects in the distance, but now it was much worse. It reminded me of something I'd read in Charles Tart's book regarding divided attention. He instructed his students in active looking:

*I want you to actively, curiously look at something for a few seconds, then shift your eyes to something else for a few seconds....*

blank looking—staring in one direction without taking in what one is seeing. [11]

Having my vision disrupted and permanently altered to some degree unknown as yet, has given me the opportunity to experiment with how I use my eyes. Being at Blackstone and witnessing such things as phosphorescent “fire on water” was moving me in this direction already. The point is to have at one’s disposal different ways of looking at the world and enough discernment to know when to use them. This in turn implies working against a lifetime habit of visual laziness.

Although I need to let my eye recuperate and not strain it, I feel as though I am starting on a long overdue journey. Alongside the practical retraining of my eye and brain, I have many pathways to explore. There is the vast field of the neuroscience of vision and its implications, to which I have already referred.

Vicki alerted me to another avenue when she mentioned John Berger’s books on seeing and looking. [12] I quickly recognized someone who is well down the path onto which I am stepping. In the opening pages

of *Ways of Seeing*, he articulates the relationship between seeing and knowing that I delved into on that phosphorescent night:

*It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain the world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded with it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet, the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight. [13]*

He goes on to investigate how the way we see paintings, the way we look at friends, and how we perceive places are determined, often unconsciously, by our beliefs, what we think we know, and the contexts within which all this is occurring. [14]

After spending weeks with my eyes closed most of the time, I was intrigued to come across Miriam Hill’s approach to a phenomenology of sightlessness. She notes how some blind people, being less distracted by the visual chaos of the world, are able to develop “enhanced object perception” in which objects are experienced “as a pressure, a physical presence, an exchange

between the inner and outer world that encompasses the whole being, described as life itself, whereas sight paints a picture of life.” [15]

I am far from being blind, but sensing the world “from the inside” resonates with some of the ways I have been perceiving my surroundings recently. Hill also makes connections with the topics of my two preceding letters when she claims that “continued cultivation of the body’s ability to utilize the wealth of sensory data available to it... may yield even closer bonds between the body and its environs” and that the focusing of bodily attention is key to the development of enhanced object perception. [16] At least for accomplished unsighted people, the vast sensory flux coming into the body is something that can be consciously worked with, and focused attention is critical.

I am writing these words on the veranda wearing my new reading glasses. The oil is still in my eye, so the right-hand side of the page is blurred, there is the ever-present shadow over it, and my peripheral vision doesn’t extend as far to the right. [17] I won’t know until the oil is surgically removed in a month or two whether the rest of the retina will remain attached. If I glance up, the screen of the world that I see is almost as flat as the page until I start shifting the focus of my eyes, and depths and distances open up.

The scudding wind brings the salt spray to my nostrils and skin, and the crash of the whipped-up waves to my ears. It’s not a day for swimming, but my marine immersion experiments continue. I’m constantly aware of the tension between my efforts to become more conscious of how I use my eyes, how my body responds to the water, and the recognition of the immense flow of sensory material that bypasses my consciousness altogether.

I suspect that for David Abram, the tension, if it is a tension at all, is highly creative. He writes of his discovery that the body subtly blends itself with every phenomenon it perceives:

*During those days, it began to seem as though my body was not, properly speaking, mine, but rather a piece of the sensu-*



ous world – and seeing was a steady trading of myself with the things seen there, so that this sensitive flesh became a kind of distributed thing, and the visible terrain a field of feeling.... The commingling of myself with things did not dissolve the distance between us, and so the sentience at large was hardly a homogeneous unity or bland “oneness”, but was articulated as various nodes and knots and flows that shifted as I moved within the broad landscape. [18]

In this passage, Abram refers to an extraordinary period of his life in which he was working high in the Himalayas under the tutelage of a remarkable shaman. It would be facile, though, to dismiss his experience as being beyond the capacity of the ordinary person in daily life. The insights gained at such a time can be the impetus for a lifetime’s practice.

Indeed, the current uncertainties over my vision are keeping me in a state of limbo in which I feel more open to the possibilities that Abram offers the reader. I’m having to relearn how to see, involve myself in more active exchange with the visual world, and discriminate between the use of objective and non-object seeing. I’ve experienced the healing effect of immersing myself in the non-visual sensorium of the shoreline.

At times, I do feel that my body is commingling with, but not dissolving into, the waters of the Channel. The thought that the trauma of a detached retina might be opening the way into deeper participation in the sentience at large that is Blackstone, whether dimly perceived or not, fills me with gladness.

## Notes

1. There are a hundred times more photoreceptor cells in the retina than fibers in the optic nerve, so that there is a great deal of pre-processing of signals even before they get to the brain. If only one percent of the visual “information” that strikes the retina gets passed along to the brain (where it is further processed to produce an image), then this is indeed “hard-wired” into the functioning of the retina and raises the question of what happens to the other ninety-nine percent of the signals. The retina “com-

presses” information coming from the photoreceptor cells by concentrating on the edges of perceived objects rather than their interiors. This indicates the extent to which “non-object seeing” is working against the way the eye normally functions (information collated from *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 27, 1987; Wikipedia article on “retina”; and other sources).

2. Through livestock removal and planting of native trees and bushes—see Letter 6.

3. As described in Letter 6. Although I am distinguishing between using bird calls to identify the species and simply absorbing the qualities of the sounds themselves, the most interesting question is how the two uses of hearing can complement each other, perhaps in an analogous way to the complementary uses of vision I discuss below.

4. See V.S. Ramachandran’s *The Tell-Tale Brain* (NY: W.W. Norton, 2011).

5. In terms of eye-brain coordination, one notes that the optic nerve and retina develop as outgrowths of the brain and are composed of nerve cells, and so they are considered as part of the central nervous system. The retina is the only part of that system that can be viewed non-invasively (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 27, 1987).

6. Some time after this essay was written, I attended an exhibition of Edvard Munch’s paintings at the Tate Modern gallery in London. One of the works, “Disturbed Vision, 1930,” depicted the effect on the painter’s vision when he suffered a hemorrhage in his right eye. It must have affected the upper section of his eye, because the rounded shadow occupied the lower third of the painting. It was identical in appearance to mine—a dark, parabolic mass shot through with murky colors and flashes of light—and startling to see it rendered on the canvas so graphically.

7. From Martin Buber’s classic distinction between I-it relationships with an object separate from oneself and I-thou relationships where there is no separation; see M. Buber, *I and Thou* (London: Continuum, 2004; originally 1922).

8. In the final section of Letter 9.

9. C. Tart, *Living the Mindful Life* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), p. 56.

10. As described in Letter 6. Presumably, it would be far easier to scan the visual

field, shifting continually from far to close vision, if I had developed better visual habits earlier. Perhaps my being acutely shortsighted from a very early age has some bearing on the matter.

11. Such considerations have complicated my visual contact with other people because I have always been a firm believer in sustained eye contact with the person with whom I am having a conversation. Merely parking my eyes on a person’s face is not having genuine contact, though. At the moment, I’m particularly self-conscious about what I do with my eyes because it is disconcerting for others, since I have one normal blue eye and one dilated black eye that is bloodshot.

12. J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972); *The Look of Things* (NY: Viking, 1972); *The Sense of Sight* (NY: Vintage, 1985).

13. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 7. By coincidence, after I wrote this chapter, Berger published a short book on his experiences of having cataracts and undergoing surgery. See J. Berger, *Cataract* (London, Notting Hill Editions, 2012).

14. These contexts are not neutral—what often interests Berger is what one might call the politics of vision, in which entrenched political and economic powers use visual means for hegemonic purposes.

15. M. Hill, *Bound to the Environment: Towards a Phenomenology of Sightlessness*, in D. Seamon and R. Mugerauer, eds., *Dwelling, Place and Environment* (Malabar, Florida: Krieger, 2000), p. 107.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

17. A year after the retinal detachment, I find that a striking example of the brain’s plasticity has occurred, literally in front of my eyes. I have watched as the “shadow” in my right visual field has progressively weakened. Although nothing organic has changed in my right eye, nor can it, since part of the retina has been removed, the only remnant of the shadow is a vague film over that part of my visual field. Apparently, my brain has gradually substituted signals from my left eye in preference to the signals coming from that part of my damaged right eye.

18. D. Abram, *Becoming Animal*, (NY: Pantheon, 2010).