

Being-in *The New World*

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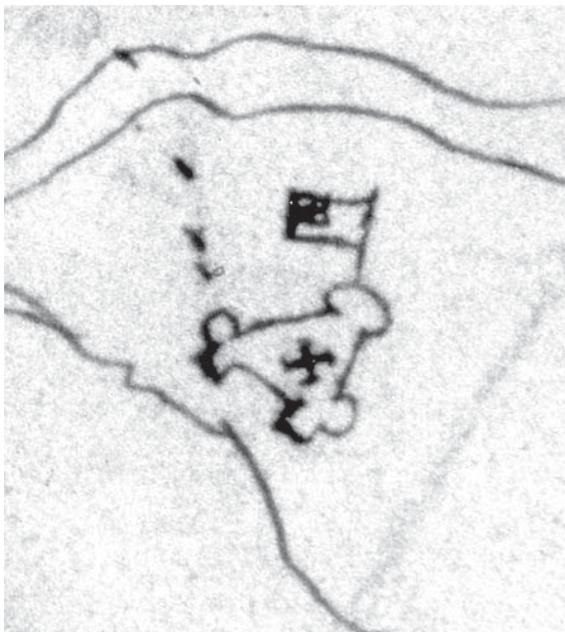


Fig. 1. Sketch of the Jamestown settlement.¹

1543 Nicolaus Copernicus' *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* is published.

1610 Galileo Galilei publishes observations supporting the Copernican heliocentric universe.

1633 Renee Descartes finishes work on *The World*, which is "to provide a mechanistic cosmology, resting on the basis of quantitative 'laws of nature', and a mechanistic physiology."² But he does not publish after hearing of the Inquisition's condemnation of Galileo.³ (It is eventually published in 1664)

1607 The Jamestown settlement is founded in Virginia.

INTRODUCTION

"The world now appears as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought, attacks that nothing is believed able any longer to resist. Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry. This relation of man to the world as such, in principle a technical one, developed in the seventeenth century first and only in Europe. It long remained unknown in other continents, and it was altogether alien to former ages and histories."⁴

The phrase 'The New World' has regularly been used in association with the Europeans 'discovery' of the Americas. Terrence Malick's⁵ film of the same name questions this idea of 'discovery' by implicitly turning the tables on the habitual conception of this phrase, suggesting that 'the new world' is not found in the Americas but is in fact a new worldview brought across the Atlantic by 17th Century Europeans. This worldview is shaped by the Copernican universe, Newtonian science, and Cartesian rationalism. In the film, Malick is not shy about highlighting the shortcomings of this worldview, setting it in stark contrast to the Native American worldview and its corresponding environmental sensitivity. From an architectural standpoint Malick paints an interesting picture of how these different perspectives come with a corresponding consciousness and attitude toward place that have significant implications for the future of community, building, and sustainability in general.

In order to explore these contrasting worldviews and to speculate on how we might move toward a deeper consideration of building within our environment, this paper draws upon Martin Heidegger's description of the phenomenon of 'world' and the three-fold structure of 'being-in', as well

as his critique of Descartes. Building a bridge between these ideas, as represented in the film, and the contemporary world highlights a key point; that the foundations for sustainable architecture come in the form of a basic attunement with culture, place, and situation.

BEING

"come spirit
help us sing the story of our land
you are the mother
we a field of corn
we rise from out of the soul of you." ⁶

This particular sentiment, expressed in a voiceover at the beginning of the film, is indicative of the how Malick's 'Naturals' (Native Americans), view their relationship with the world. Throughout the film they exhibit practices that reflect and reiterate these opening lines: their movement and body image convey that each possess an animal spirit; their dress allows mobility and connection with the climate; they appear to be infinitely inquisitive and open; they communicate in physical and tactile ways; and they build and work in a manner interwoven with place and culture. For the Naturals all is interrelated and they activate and receive meaning directly through a reciprocal engagement with the world. In this way it becomes obvious that the Naturals are an attuned people, as all aspects of their immediate environment become in effect part of them. The Naturals have only one world, that of their culture and surroundings. The example of the Naturals in the film calls not for a return to some lost ideal, but rather for a deeper, more critical perception of our contemporary technology-driven worldview, as represented in the film by the English.

The English, in contrast with the Naturals, are preoccupied with their goals and things they *will be* doing in a way that they are generally unable to connect with anything meaningful in their current circumstance. These European settlers, with their Cartesian worldview, arrive in ships that stand atop the harbor like soldiers on the march, a scene witnessed by the scuttling natives, who shift and slide amongst the trees, enmeshed with the underbrush of the shoreline. Continuing in their awkward fashion, the English come ashore wearing ungainly suits of armor and suspiciously survey all aspects of their new environment. Even-

tually they will show their primary concerns to be that of security, material fulfillment, and personal glory, all of which remain tied in memory and spirit to their home in the British Isles. Malick's portrayal of Modernity in its infancy already has the English demonstrating behaviors ubiquitous in contemporary culture, whereby a single life, or even a single day, spans a multitude of discrete and independent worlds, all of which compete for one's attention.

WORLD

"What can be meant by describing 'the world' as phenomenon? It means to let us see what shows itself in 'entities' within the world."⁷

In *Being and Time* Heidegger outlines four different notions of 'world'. Two of these speak of the places of entities, and two relate a more structural import, addressing the way in which things take on significance for us. What is important about 'world' from an existential point of view is that it speaks of a wholeness that makes things intelligible. For example, the world of the classroom makes certain actions make sense, affording me the possibility of being an architecture professor, which would not be open in, say, the world of a family dinner.

In this chapter Heidegger goes on to critique Descartes' worldview, which, in his estimation, is not so much wrong as it is simply that his ideas about world just leave too much out. What is missing, according to Heidegger, are the existential structures that afford our relational understandings and significance of our environment as we experience it, such as the classroom in the previous example. Descartes is thinking about world categorically, as a place where substances are found. Furthermore, Descartes' worldview is also problematic as his mind and body duality necessarily sets up oppositional associations, as Heidegger explains:

"Descartes distinguishes the 'ego cogito' from the 'res corporea'. This distinction will thereafter be determinative ontologically for the distinction between nature and spirit."⁸

The English and their Cartesian outlook unfold into an antagonistic subject/object relationship in all dealings, which is compounded by their inability to remain absorbed in each distinct world they enter into. The result is an existence that is far from

attunement to the worldhood of each world; their overarching conception of being as subjects and objects keeps the English unaware of any structural whole defining a given situation, and means that each world is seen simply as a different area filled with greater or lesser degrees of resources. In the film the English display again and again their unawareness of the worldhood of the world, as they continually set up belligerent dualisms focused almost exclusively on resource acquisition. One example occurs shortly after their arrival:

“Emery: When might we, uh, be going out to... poke about, sir?
 Captain Christopher Newport: We are not here to pillage and raid. We are here to establish a colony.”

Throughout the film the English see their involvements as means rather than ends, and in so doing miss the real riches of their adventure.

The one exception amongst the English is Captain John Smith who serves as mediator between the two cultures. His position helps to bring the differences between the Naturals and the English into sharp focus. From the outset he seems skeptical of the English ways and this suspicion is affirmed after he is captured and consequently goes to live with the Naturals. Malick’s depiction of Smith’s experiences while living with the Naturals provides both exposition and implicit commentary as to the superiority of the Naturals way of life. Opposed to the English, the Naturals comport themselves toward the world in a way that is consistent with worldhood as an existential structure and that allows for a mutual exchange within an environmental whole.

FALLING

“In falling, Dasein itself as factual Being-in-the-world, is something from which it has already fallen away. And it has not fallen into some entity which it comes upon for the first time in the course of its Being, or even one which it has not come upon at all; it has fallen into the world, which itself belongs to its Being.”⁹

Heidegger’s threefold structure of Being-in helps us further explore the sources of difference between these two cultures and what is present or lacking in their differing worldviews and engagements with the world.

Falling has to do with involvement and the way in which one is absorbed in a world and as Heidegger says, one is always already falling. In other words, one’s interest and attention is always somewhere and this process cannot be suspended if one is to Be-in-the-world. The critical question for falling, particularly with a multiplicity of worlds, is the trajectory of the fall. A trajectory aligned with the current world of involvement is necessary for said world to take on significance. If one’s trajectory brings one closer to the world of involvement then things can show up in the light of being more or less relevant to the particular situation at hand. However, if one is falling into a world that is other, then current involvements cannot be effectual, understood, or skillfully engaged.

The Naturals are shown throughout the movie as always falling into the situation as given, allowing themselves to be absorbed in exactly what they are doing and the relationships associated with it. It appears in part that their innocence and inquisitiveness allow them to incorporate even the arrival of the English into their own practices and let them become part of the world as they know it. This openness is remarkable and they are described by Captain John Smith as “... gentle, loving, faithful, lacking in all guile and trickery. The words denoting lying, deceit, greed, envy, slander, and forgiveness have never been heard. They have no jealousy, no sense of possession.” The Naturals exhibit a wonder about the world that lends itself to a way of life that is marked by inclusivity, cohesion, and harmony.

In contrast, the English appear to fall in every direction *except* that of their current situation. When they arrive we see that they have brought and intend to hold on to their dress, practices, values, and techniques, all of which possess a distinctly English character. Furthermore, it is not as if these things allow them a unique perspective on the new circumstance; rather, they represent a clinging to past knowledge and the world of Europe. Captain Newport’s remark seems to typify the English ambivalence of opening to this new land: “Bring the anchors and the mid-sails to shore in case some homesick person decides to slip away with them.” This inability to engage the environment on its own terms becomes a principal source of the English’s problems. In future generations, this same attitude will begin to erode

meaning, level particularities, and lead to a technological way of being that views nature as 'a gigantic gasoline station'.¹⁰

AFFECTEDNESS

"What we indicate ontologically by the term *be-findlichkeit* (affectedness) is ontically the most familiar and everyday sort of thing; our mood, our Being-attuned."¹¹

The English are certainly unaffected by this new continent in any robust way, as again they appear to be mainly in awe of its resources, an attitude summed up by one of the crew members, who proclaims, "Captain Newport, sir, I found oysters. They're as thick as my hands. They're the size of stones sir and there's fish everywhere they're flapping against your legs. We're gonna live like kings." Shortly thereafter Captain Newport, in what at first seems to be a sensitive remark, gives further evidence of the English overlooking the full potential for Jamestown, when he says "We must be careful not to offend the Naturals... If our crops fail, we shall be obliged to trade with them. Once we're established here, we may go up the river and seek a route to the other sea." Over and over again, we see that the fundamental characteristics of this place remain invisible to the English, who are unable to see anything as an end in itself and are seemingly incapable of awe even in the face of the beauty of unadulterated nature's boiling phenomena. Again, the limited affectedness exhibited by the English in Malick's film is echoed again in the shortcomings of our own contemporary relation to the world, as the simple splendor of things is often overlooked and frequently brushed aside in the name of progress.

Affectedness for the Naturals, who clearly hold the land sacred as their home, can be summed up in one statement by Pocahontas: "I will find joy in all I see."

UNDERSTANDING

"Understanding is the existential Being of Dasein's own potentiality-for-Being; and it is so in such a way that this Being discloses in itself what its Being is capable of."¹²

For Heidegger, understanding connotes not intellectual certitude but skillful engagement, with the goal of understanding not to explain, but to

demonstrate knowing though involvement. In *The New World*, the differing degrees of understanding become evident in the distinctions between the two cultures' settlements.

Ultimately it is the Naturals' total involvement that allows them to have the existence and society that they do and further calls out the English inability to demonstrate any depth in their understanding the new world, which is effectively the source of their now well established awkwardness within their new surroundings.

For the Naturals, settlement is understood as topological in nature and is presented as being woven through the trees. This arrangement not only amplifies the pre-existing beauty of this specific place, but further establishes 'places' that are nested within the region, as Heidegger says of the bridge in his essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking': "...the bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it; rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge". This form of building is not only participatory, but also allows both what is built and the location that is disclosed to become more striking by the very engagement with the other. Building undertaken as a reciprocal exchange recognizes potential and then moves to poetically accentuate already existing places. For the Naturals in their forest home it is a matter of drawing out the latent aspects that already suggest a particular use and relation to the whole. As Christian Norberg-Schulz explains,

"... man wants to make the natural structure more precise. That is, he wants to visualize his "understanding" of nature, "expressing" the existential foothold he has gained. To achieve this, he *builds* what he has seen. Where nature suggests a delimited space he builds an enclosure; where nature appears 'centralized' he erects a *Mal*; where nature indicates a direction, he makes a path."¹³

So in this way the village springs from an already-rich spatiality, building up and articulating the 'natural structure' via materials, light, and use, accommodating activities by employing large fields for warrior training, small breaks in the trees and brushwood for shell sorting, cooking, and sleeping. A larger central clearing in the forest allows for ceremonial and civic activities of the tribal leaders. In this way, the Naturals' settlement is sprinkled throughout the trees in a variety of scaled openings, thus leaving the impression



Fig. 2. Detail of longhouse from John Smith's 1612 map of Virginia.¹⁴

that the forest and the settlement grew up together over time.

Furthermore, all aspects of tribal life are centered on the place of the village proper. Tasks and practices are highly ritualized and there is a sense that in terms of setting up this life the Naturals possess a sensitivity which affords them the ability to respond precisely and specifically to a given situation. One area where this is exhibited is in their sapling and reed-skin dwellings which, like their clothing, seem to be exactly substantial enough to serve their needs for home and shelter without going to excess. These structures are multiple in their engagements with life and nature as the historical reality tells us that saplings were stuck into the ground bent over and tied at the top with strong roots, they were then covered with tree bark or mats made from woven reeds. Furthermore, a hole was left in the top of the house so that a fire could remain burning for both warmth and to ward off evil spirits. Instead of doors the houses employed hanging mats which could be opened completely for ventilation when the weather was hot.¹⁵ If these structures were any

more substantial they would not only have wasted resources but also created unnecessary separations between the people and their surroundings.

As you might imagine the English take on the task of creating a settlement in an almost diametrically opposed way. First rather than being topological, their village is distinctly geometric, taking on a triangular form, which is established in a bare clearing. This portrayal is true to the actual Jamestown settlement and is consistent with the emerging 17th Century worldview, which was coming to be more and more captivated by mathematical geometrics. Rather than allowing the totality of this place to suggest possibilities and building upon those suggestions, as exemplified by the Naturals, the singular understanding of this place comes in terms of military and strategic concerns as Captain Newport describes the site selection for the colony, "This place will serve. We have deep water to the shore. We can see up and down the river. Our enemies will have no advantage of surprise." The specifics of building the settlement are equally strategic, military, and un-attuned as Captain Newport's commands his men:

"Tonight we shall sleep aboard our ships, everyone in full armor. In the morning, we will chop down every tree within half a mile of the moorage, and use the straightest limbs to erect a line of watch-towers and to build our fort. When we have done that, we set our wheat and barley, put up houses and lay in firewood. Slackers will be whipped at the sight of their transgression."

This premeditated, systematized, and unresponsive means of building clearly obstructs any chance that the particularities of this area along the James River might enhance or influence the character of this settlement. In terms of the actual building, the boundary that the English erect is relentlessly present and creates a strong separation between the village itself and the environment around it. Inside the palisades the houses appear as overbuilt English vernacular and the interstitial spaces are mainly characterized by being muddy and amorphous both functionally and spatially.

The settlement at Jamestown appears to be the apotheosis of world-poor Cartesianism and is a lucid demonstration of the limitations of this type of perspective. Jamestown's lack of place-specific character and nonexistent interchange with the surrounding ecosystem stem directly from

the English reliance on predetermined solutions and a fixation on resources. Their overall failure reinforces Heidegger's view that one's existential possibilities are to be sharply distinguished from mere factual or logical alternatives.¹⁶

CONCLUSIONS

"The 'environment' does not arrange itself in a space which has been given in advance; but its specific worldhood, in its significance, articulates the context of involvements which belongs to some current totality of circumspectively allotted places."¹⁷

Instead of reading *The New World* as an advertisement for primitivism, perhaps it can be viewed as a reminder of the importance of a robust understanding of place and the significance and intelligibility that is to be gleaned through such sensitivity. Furthermore, Malick's film provides a good study of technology as it relates to Being-in-the-world, in that while both the Naturals and the English are using technology that appears primitive to us, one uses tools to activate their environment and become more deeply situated, while the other uses tools to exploit and carry out their self-referential machinations. This seems to suggest that it is not necessarily technology itself that causes problems; rather, it is our attitudes and understandings that are critical to the successful interchange between place and technology. Heidegger makes two wonderful points to this end as he calls out our responsibility in the proper implementation of equipment by saying, "I would call this comportment toward technology which expresses 'yes' and at the same time 'no,' by an old word, *releasement (gelassenheit) toward things*."¹⁸ And "I call the comportment which enables us to keep open to the meaning hidden in technology, *openness to the mystery*."¹⁹ So this is to suggest both that technology be understood situationally and not for its own sake, and also that we use it to become closer to those things we care for.

Thinking about architecture from this perspective, one might see that in fact it is a strong regard toward the environment that is lacking in many banal repetitive developments. If we consider this again using Heidegger's suggestion that Being is essentially empty, an opening, a clearing -- then one might begin to consider how a building too might not just be an agent or object but rather

become an environment. Williams and Tsien's Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla, CA provides a good example of this.

In terms of sustainable design, it is critical to bear in mind that the foundations for any architecture of lasting value will be found in those environments that elevate the spirit through their connections to nature, context, and place. Perhaps an awareness that moves toward a more *sustainable* sustainability engages in what Heidegger calls 'meditative thinking', standing against the idea that pure science is the road to a happier life. Scientific thinking, Heidegger says, gets in the way of our reflecting upon the, "...ground that enabled modern technology to discover and set free new energies in nature?"²⁰ In failing to see this ground we begin to lose our foundations, and yet what is really disturbing "...is not that the world is becoming entirely technical... Far more uncanny is our being unprepared for this transformation, our inability to confront meditatively what is really dawning in this age."²¹ In this way it appears it is again up to us *as humans* to reflect on those things meaningful in this world, and strive to bring technology back into the service them.

Terrence Malick's *The New World* presents the arrival of the Modern age and gives a view that can be seen as presenting how the inability to be open, participatory, and situated in a particular place leads to egregious misappropriations of resources and fundamental oversights in terms of the participation with, and activation of, the world in which we live. The difference between the Jamestown settlers and the Naturals is striking and if the only thing one takes from the film is simply the qualitative difference in the lives of these two cultures existing in the same location with the same resources, it would still be enough to understand why Heidegger says, "...once meditative thinking awakens, it must be at work unceasingly and on every last occasion..." If it is not, we end up in a leveled existence where experiences becomes meaningless and the only things of significance left are those that are understood to be a means to something else. Without humans skillfully 'Being-in', there can be no world.

ENDNOTES

1. (<http://www.virtualjamestown.org/mapz.html>)
2. Rene Descartes, "Descartes : The World: And Other Writings," ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Port Chester, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.
3. Ibid., 31.
4. Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 50.
5. Malick is a former philosophy PhD student and teacher. In 1969 he published an English translation of Heidegger's 'Essence of Reasons'
6. Terrence Malick, "The New World," (USA: New Line Cinema, 2006).
7. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Seventh ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962) 91.
8. Ibid. 90.
9. Ibid. 176.
10. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*.
11. Heidegger, *Being and Time* 134.
12. Ibid. 145.
13. Christian Norberg-Schulz, "The Phenomenon of Place," in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*, ed. Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 421.
14. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Powhatan_john_smith_map.jpg
15. <http://oncampus.richmond.edu/academics/education/projects/webunits/vahistory/village.html>
16. Heidegger, *Being and Time* 144.
17. Ibid. 105.
18. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* 54.
19. Ibid. 55.
20. Ibid. 50.
21. Ibid. 52.