

Private Landscapes, Public Environments: Personal Memory and the Experience of Built Space

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As a boy, I spent a much time as I could at the Schuylkill River playground, on the superswings, pushing the limits of numerous forces...all the while pretending to be a helicopter pilot hovering over a very special place which loomed in the distance: the great athletic arena, Franklin Field (of the University of Pennsylvania). Located past the playing field, the cyclone fence, the railroad and the flowing river ... made of strong materials and old design, it was bigger than any church I'd ever seen.... The spirit of the athletes echoes through this sturdy stadium, built of walls, arches, columns.... To me, this "great wonder" was and is a reminder of good times ... gigantic but cozy... in my mind, I can find security..(Owen Maguire)

INTRODUCTION: DESIGN COMPOSTING

Architectural design is a leap into the future, into the frightening and exhilarating unknown. The past serves as the basis, the "ground" for this creation, but is often unacknowledged as a generator. This paper will explore the importance of public place to memory, and the reverse: the importance of memory to the making, retaining, or restoring of public places. The merging of personal and community memories with artistic vision is a process I have dubbed *design composting*. I will examine how widely shared our attachments are to physical places, and suggest that our individual memories, based as they are in some common human responses to physical place, can transcend the quiriness of the individual to connect with the collective experience and consciousness to contribute to our cities and our lives. We can tap into our personal memories of public places, those abiding and residual images, to design more powerful community spaces. I submit that, out of the "solid ground" of the past turned over into present awareness, our buildings and landscapes can bloom.

The active components of *design composting* are personal memories, collective experiences, and imagination. Students as well as entire communities can develop an intimate understanding of the human significance of the environment through this process of recalling and exploring personal and collective relationships with the natural and built environment. I have utilized the process for both the intimate realms of domestic architecture and for public places: for this paper, I will focus on the technique in relation to the realms of city placemaking.

When personal experiences are regarded as insignificant, architecture becomes an elite, remote thing apart from ourselves. Developing as a designer, then, may be perceived by students as a "re-education" process requiring approval from an authority, such as the professor. In public design, the result can be places removed from individual or community experience and significance. In contrast, *design composting* privileges the perceptions and knowledge of the individual within the community, affirming self-sufficiency, and contributing to

the intellectual and creative self-confidence required for design. In the design composting process, I encourage the past to be brought to consciousness, as a rich pile of memories that can be transformed into opportunity for the powerful creation of community places – places that promote connections, allow for difference, and express the depth of an entire community through the creative work of a few.

THE INGREDIENTS OF A COMPOST PILE

... my high school gym.... The walls need repainting, the tiles on the floor are coming up, the basketball courts aren't that great, and it's dirty. To anyone else it would look like crap, but not in my eyes.... day in and day out I walked up to the gym to practice.... the echo...it sounded like there were thousands of frantic fans screaming for me....the light...somehow would shine through the windows making a spotlight on the floor...it gave me motivation while I practiced. Not only did I learn that practice and determination made me good in basketball, it also made me good at other sports and in life and school.... I love that gym. (Travis Wood)

The underground concourse below City Hall.... every time I go there I have futuristic fantasies.... I picture lasers and rebellions. I imagine being chased, knowing that there is no place to go but forward....encased by cement and earth. The simple structures are pleasing to me: the straight walls and ceilings, the pillars and grates, the odors and leaks that drip from the ceiling. It is all so simple and at the same time it is all pure urban. (Ian Villarreal)

For the past fifteen years in design studios and history courses, I have utilized subjective writing assignments on memories of places. It was in the work of writer and writing teacher Natalie Goldberg that I gleaned the potent image of the compost pile, with its fetid, rotting mound of garbage transforming the discreet pieces of carrot peels, eggshells and grass clippings into rich, active loam. Goldberg encourages nascent writers to look at their pasts and then sift their experiences through consciousness to create a fertile soil for their literary efforts.¹ In my classes, personal writings are used to develop a sense of place grounded in their individual experience of the world. Through discussion and exchange with classmates, as well as additional readings and design exercises, individual memories are enlarged into a sense of the common dimensions and underlying structures that underlie powerful places. This sense of the personal combined with the collective establish a framework for the development of place understanding. Then, this rich understanding can be extended into the design process.

The theoretical paradigms underlying design composting can be most effectively framed by phenomenological approaches to both architecture and language, and by constructivist theories of learning. The connections between these theoretical perspectives offers opportunities to the design teacher or practitioner interested in integrating the design process with other learning and with the lived and experienced world.

CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING

Constructivist theories of learning, growing from the work of Piaget and others, emphasize that learning occurs through integration – by forming constellations of related ideas, rather than on the acquisition of specific knowledge.² In this model of psychological functioning, individuals actively construct their experience into structures of thought that can be accessed through a web of multiple associations. Donald Shoen's theories of the reflective practitioner is developed from this base, for example.³ As early as 1926, Eduard Lindeman, a follower of John Dewey's, warned that "too much of learning consists of vicarious substitution of someone else's experience and knowledge."⁴ In inquiry-based teaching (which grows from constructivist theory), a student's general knowledge of the world is as important as the information provided in classes. The adult education specialist Malcolm Knowles had suggested that it is vital that learning relate to and make use of the experience of learners – both by exploiting it as a resource for learning and by helping students apply new learning to their experience.⁵

Language is crucial to the process. Language is the means by which we can reflect and elaborate on experience in order to make it useful. Pioneer developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky emphasized that thoughts do not have their automatic counterpart in words so the relation between thought and word is a living process, with "the transition from thought to word leading through meaning."⁶

The non-visual process of writing is a way in which the multiplicity of experience in all its richness can begin to be explored. Writings can be evocative, ambiguous and multi-temporal, thereby capturing the wholeness of memory in a way that sketching or other architectural techniques may not. Writing does not supplant design, nor does it become integrated into the design *per se*, but it can open a space for the personal and collective to be merged. The introspective and self-centered nature of personal writings is essential at the beginning. Architecture is a cultural art for public use so understanding cannot remain at the individual level, nor can it remain without critical, if non-judgemental, evaluation. It is through the sharing of memories that individual perceptions and experiences can be connected to societal and intellectual trends. Rigorous exchange is required for mutually constructed meanings to be forged. In the compost-pile analogy, it takes vigorous turning with a pitchfork to create good dirt.

As a child, whenever I opened the door (to the Philadelphia airport), I felt relief...it was like stepping into a spaceship...the acoustics are different from outside. It is similar to entering a new car, where the noise of all the outside elements are decreased. (Sopheak Ly)

Memories of place can be powerful forces propelling design. Heidegger called memory "the source of poetry," and that humans dwell "between work and word."⁷ Norberg Schulz elaborated on this: "the word opens the world and the work gives the world presence."⁸ And while Bachelard differentiates between beloved childhood memories and the imaginative realms of poetic reverie, he also speculates that "we are never real historians, but always near poets..."⁹ In the realm of near-poets, student writings begin to explore the phenomenological implications of their own lives, making them available for analysis and reconsideration. For the Greeks, memory and imagination belonged to the same part of the soul; so to shed the past in

favor of the new and rational may sever that creative connection.¹⁰ With design composting, students can reframe their memories into a public context.

TERRAIN: COMMON AND CONTESTED

...the foyer to Bloomingdale's (at the mall)...the glass and mirrored facade add mystery...inside I get a sense of ease. There are trees and rectangular pools of water with little fountains...the noise of the running water relaxes me...It is bright at the center but seems to darken to the left and right.... (Roslyn Tassone)

One of my favorite places is the subway...dark and dingy... the "iron chariots" are traveling at high speed underneath the city...a whole city of tunnels within itself. The architectural scheme of the subway is nothing to brag about, looks to be a continuous series of columns and crossbeams, but it is the mystery of the subway that has captured my fascination...untold stories...How did the workers feel working several hundred feet under the city's surface? What does the adventurous graffiti artist encounter within the tunnel as he strives to put up his mark? (Sean Martin)

We can connect with other people about the meaning of place while simultaneously recognizing the politics of identity that are played out in the physical world. My approach utilizes (both as underlying assumptions, and as readings for students) ideas such as Jung's collective unconscious and universal archetypes, and Setha Low's concept of "place attachment."¹¹ as well as the politics of subculture sociology and the implication of the "neuralized city."¹²

The composting approach emphasizes that as we move through daily life, experiences are at once personal and part of a collective - the web of life in a city. A city's inner life is unleashed through the nuances of street life, and the details of place, as Walter Benjamin observed so potently while walking in Paris: "...signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a crackling twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance..."¹³ Aldo van Eyck's phrase "a building as that building entered" also reveals architecture as an act of engagement.

...(at the train station) once you pass through the heavy doors, you feel like you've somehow gotten smaller, almost like "Alice in Wonderland. When I walk toward the winged statue, it always seems to grow as I get closer. ...[There is] a lot of space for rushing commuters to make their trains on time. The large amount of space along with the stone and marble creates echoes of even the softest sounds. (David Rupp)

Tony Hiss' study and reflection on human place-making suggests that in the "pinpoint focus" of "ordinary perception," we commonly feel separate from things and other beings.¹⁴ We act as observers, picking and choosing what to use, and that which we do not choose becomes inert and, in the end, alienated from us. Christine Boyer, in her examination and critique of the city as understood through urban imagery, describes the ordinary state of the modern public as first identified by Benjamin, as a state of "absentmindedness," as spectators that seek "entertainment, escape and gratification" in comfortable "pictorial representations."¹⁵ This state of mind has been satisfied by real estate developers in malls, megastores, urban marketplaces, and flashy corporate structures. Additionally, as we move into the "cybercity" as Christine Boyer terms it, we are faced with the dematerialized, virtual world, a simulated screen world.¹⁶ As images become substitutes for actual experience, it takes active work to prevent city life from becoming a TV news show - a place of disappearance - rather than the lived present of daily life.

In contrast, Hiss identifies another mode of perception, our “broadband,” inclusive, simultaneous perception that links us to our surroundings, connecting us to the people and things around us.¹⁷ This awareness can be brought to the surface through specific sorts of designs of physical place: the design of a place can encourage a shift from ordinary to simultaneous perception. One of his examples is the Grand Central Station complex in New York City, an experience similar to that in Philadelphia’s central train station, 30th St. Station (the building selected most often by my students as their most vivid public place). Hiss describes the cooperative experience of moving along low crowded corridors from the subway tunnels, expanding suddenly to a feeling of the “connectedness” in the grand space of the concourse.¹⁸ A place with these design characteristics allows simultaneous perception to become operative and help us become aware of our own experiencing.

...I was instantly dwarfed by its height, width, length and depth of this enormous cavity. The atmosphere is both frenzied and calm, as some people hurry to trains...others wait... others dine or browse... (Ronald Mason)

No matter how busy the station seems to be, it never really seems overcrowded....in its noisiest times, it always seems serene. The lighting is soft...there are large stained glass windows which decorate the high walls, the floors appear to be like marble, with seating which reminds me of pews in a church. (Brent Greenfield)

HAYDEN AND THE POWER OF PLACE

The urban historian Delores Hayden underscores the significance and the opportunity of the “contested terrain of race, gender and class.”¹⁹ By emphasizing rather than ignoring that the politics of identity are played out in the physical world, she intertwines spatial design with social issues. She advances that urban landscapes are “storehouses” that frame our lives, outlast our individual lives, and thereby create a physical place of continuity and remembrance – in the realm of the political as well as the cultural and historical. It is this “volatile combination” that makes it so crucial, as well as so daunting. She advocates for “the power of place - the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens’ public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory” and reminds us that it “remains untapped for most working people’s neighborhoods...and for most ethnic history and most women’s history.”²⁰

Acknowledging the need for economic and political growth, a first step is still to “Listen... to the resonant stories of working people” and the next is to “connect... the stories to reclaim the landscape as people’s history.” Hayden points out that despite a rapidly changing cityscape, a city “retains potent memories in its streets and sidewalks, fences and alleys, buildings and vacant lots.”²¹

The non-profit group she established, *The Power of Place*, works with communities to establish places of collective meaning. Initial projects suggested a network of new public places that would represent the “complex layers of citizens’ experience of art, history and urban culture.” In the Biddy Mason project, the history of a nineteenth century African American woman was the “fertile soil” for a collaborative community process that brought together the community with historians, planners, highlighting the importance of the African-American community in L. A. and women’s history in it. The project then developed many parts, including a book, poster, article, and two site installations related to development of a commercial building and a park.²²

DESIGN COMPOSTING IN THE STUDIO

...the door of the market was slightly set back from the street...a worn wooden floor was perfect for bouncing Superballs...there was a progression of odors...Ben-Gay and Listerine in the front...a warm spice overdose of the baking shelves...the raw flesh stench of the butcher counter...in the back ... a smell of a city’s cold snow, a combination of the frozen foods mixed with the chemicals leaking from the freezer. (Susan Lewis)

I have used writing as a learning technique in undergraduate studios for over fifteen years. Both as introductory exercises to explore the nature of place making, as well as intensively integrated into the sequence of the studio process.

One semester the studio focus was on commerce, consumption, and community. The design project was a market place center for a new suburban residential community. During the research phase, the writing component concentrated on personal memories and experiences. Short papers covered experiences with stores, parking lots, and the journeys to them. In the design phase, writing shifted from memory to fictional description: students imagined the experience of a child visiting their design.

The viewpoint of a child is immediate, emotional, and shifts scale from the adult view: the terror of being eye level with dead fish in the seafood display; glimpses into the “mysterious dark space beyond the floppy doors to the back rooms;” the allure of automatic doors and shopping carts; and the overwhelming scale of supermarket shelves and disorienting aisles. These physical attributes and sensations were linked to human, interpersonal experience: the place was not separate from the people. Discussions then explored desire, money, commodification and the significance of freedom and growth in American culture. Observations on the parallel research projects were enriched by the students’ deepening sense of their own place in social and built history. The implicit assumptions in their personal writings about free trade, mobility and the physical structure of neighborhoods, stores, malls, streets, highways and parking lots could be discussed explicitly in contrast to the examples of markets in history, from the Greek agora to suburban malls.

Fictional writing in the design phase offered an alternate from architectural modes to consider their project, and one that came from their own internal voice, not from the external voice of the critic. The writing was not as fluid as those based on actual memories. However, students were able to enlarge their sense of scale, materials and detailing in the design itself. One student imagined a child progressing through his first day of daycare, thereby enabling him to imagine the design over an entire day. The description was particularly vivid in exterior areas – the ramps and stairs were overwhelming the buildings themselves. The student identified this imbalance and worked to develop the building character prior to the final review. Another student’s fictional ten-year-old wanders through the outdoor vendors, details of the design contributing to his day: “the pediment guided him into the complex...the canvas tarp above his head kept the bright sun off his head. His feet consciously stepped from one paver to the next, being careful to not step on the cracks.”

PHILADELPHIA: COLLABORATIVE PLACE-MAKING

The most exciting work that links community memories with the imaginative skill of a designer is being done by installation artists working in collaborative modes. I offer two examples – the installation work by one individual artist, and a multi-site initiative working with neighborhood all over the city.

The projects of the Philadelphia artist Lynn Denton reveal how a collaboration between a creative spirit and the community can create powerful places. A painter, ceramist, and multimedia artist, Denton has consistently reached out to the community to communicate her vision, whether it was in inviting other women artists to participate in her installation, or as artist-in-residence with women at a Senior Center in creating ceramic sculptures. In 1995-6, she involved almost one thousand members of a local neighborhood in creating handprints in tiles that were then installed as part of a new community center's facade. Each person also pressed their name into the tile, a connection to the built place that created a web of connection within the community for the building as a physical presence.

Last year, she worked in a subway station. The station has tile work characteristic of the stations of this old line, and of many American subway stations built in the first third of the twentieth century. Retaining and utilizing the existing tilework, she designed new tile panels to be inset within the decorative borders. The new tiles were created by 175 children from six schools and community centers that surround the station, and then organized into a mural by Denton called "City Diary". With Denton's encouragement and guidance, students created full size drawings of their eight inch by eight inch tiles, and then painted the tiles themselves. The design works with memory both as a recollection of times past (in the existing tilework), and as an ongoing present (in the children's contributions). It retains a link with the past and forges a connection with the future.

NEW·LAND·MARKS: PLACEMAKING ACROSS THE CITY

Philadelphia has a long tradition of public art and placemaking. An ambitious city-wide project underway since 1996 demonstrates the inclusive allure of the collaborative design process. The New·Land·Marks program linked community groups with teams of artists to design public places. As the Prospectus set out, "each project will be the outcome of a partnership, combining the artist's imagination, skill and energy with the knowledge, experience, commitment, and enthusiasm" of the residents. It went on to describe the "most valuable urban resource" as the "people, their history and their hopes for the future."²³

Sixteen projects are underway throughout the city. Projects range from twelve inch high reflective sculptures placed near sites significant in gay history, to a 1200 foot long trail through the large predominantly African-American community of North Philadelphia. South Philadelphia is a urban working class neighborhood that has reflected many of the shifts of population in the past two centuries in American cities, including current gentrification. Artist Janet Zweig worked with the neighborhood association in order to integrate the project into ongoing initiatives. The area had no public library branch and so out of conversations with the residents, she developed an Open-Air Library and Farmer's Market Plaza. Based on open-air book kiosks in Paris and Manhattan, the vernacular of the neighborhood architecture was combined with bookshelves with pivoting front panels (which provided security, weather protection, and an alternate spatial arrangement. Project planning included working with librarians, and a survey to determine the needs and interests of prospective library patrons.²⁴

CONCLUSION: WHAT GROWS ON THE COMPOST PILE?

It is essential for our discourse on the city to involve the vernacular and the monumental, the high and the low, the included and the disenfranchised. The inclusion of our cities' diversity will enrich and enlarge our expression of place. The making of public place cannot be left to speculative private interests for then our cities become marketing images of cities, so manipulated that the physical place is perceived as virtual. We cannot allow our histories to be erased. The rich compost of our memories can be sifted to create a fertile soil. The everyday details

of our pasts can transcend nostalgia and become an integrative force. The solid ground of the past remade into present awareness can allow our public buildings and landscape bloom into more powerful, meaningful places.

And I end with one last quote, from a recent Asian immigrant to Philadelphia:

This place behind the Philadelphia Art Museum...is a gazebo that couples go to enjoy the view of nature, the city, and the river... wooden columns... roof is a wood cone also has an arch as you walk into it...flowers and plants....It is located at the end of a cliff...Whenever I go there alone, I picture myself with my girlfriend, looking at the sky and stars, the river, the air flow...The built characteristics influence me in a positive way because as we stay there we feel friendship, peace, love, freedom and high spirits. (Yen Yang)

NOTES

- ¹Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones* (Boston: Shambhala Press, 1986), p. 16.
- ²Mary Di Sibio, "Memory for Connected Discourse: A Constructivist View," *Review of Educational Research* (Summer 1982) p. 163.
- ³Donald Shoen, *The Reflective Practitioner*.
- ⁴Eduard Lindeman, *The Meaning of Adult Education* (New York: New Republic, 1926), p. 69.
- ⁵Malcolm Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (Houston: Gulf, 1984) p. 84.
- ⁶Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962) p. 150.
- ⁷Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Albert Hofstadter, 1971) p. 59.
- ⁸Christian Norberg-Schulz, AMP p. 24.
- ⁹Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971) p. 34.
- ¹⁰Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) p. 33.
- ¹¹Delores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) p.16.
- ¹²Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984) p. 245.
- ¹³ibid, p.
- ¹⁴Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) p. 68.
- ¹⁵Boyer, p. 245.
- ¹⁶ibid, p.246.
- ¹⁷Hiss, p. 76.
- ¹⁸ibid, p.98.
- ¹⁹Hayden, p. 8.
- ²⁰ibid, p. 13.
- ²¹ibid, p. 266.
- ²²ibid, p. 270.
- ²³Penny Balkin Bach, ed., *New·Land·Marks: Public Art, Community and the Meaning of Place* (Washington, D.C.: Grayson Publishing, 2001) p. 18.
- ²⁴ibid p.147.

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