

Architectural Identity and the Portable Building

Robert Kronenburg

...modern self-conscious design has tended to result in places which are single-purpose, functionally efficient, often in a style independent of the physical setting, reflecting mass values and contrived fashions. The present trend appears to be away from a variety of authentically created places which reflect an interaction of diverse intentions and values with a respect for physical settings and landscapes, toward non-place urban realms, international landscapes and placelessness.¹

—Edward Relph

This was a peaceful place, this camp—a Garden of Eden on wheels, capable of picking its own latitudes and following the gentle weather round the year, a haven in which every occupant had brought his life into focus by compressing it into the minimum space, a miracle of internal arrangement plus mobility.²

—E.B. White

The sense of identity associated with a specific place is intimately linked with the human consciousness. Heidegger states that; "... 'place' places man in such a way that it reveals the external bonds of his existence and at the same time the depths of his freedom and reality."³ In the creative field, the usual assumption of how this sense of place is achieved is by the establishment of some permanent artifact that, with the passing of time, acquires a 'history' of activities and events associated with its

location that lend it significance. It is also assumed that this acquisition of 'history' is somehow accelerated by the adoption of a recognizable architectural form (neoclassical for instance) which already has a place in human understanding. In fact, this sort of achievement of a sense of place is artificial, the adoption of stereotypes which with repeated use have come to mean less and less in the general world—common in many places, unique in none. It is this placelessness to which Edward Relph refers in the extract above.

An important and perhaps unique aspect of portable building, recognized by White and his fellow campers, is the concept that architecture can exist anywhere, that it is not tied to the topographical or geographical attributes of a particular location. The significance of place is that which is determined by the builders of that architecture, not by the permanence of the artifacts which express that significance. We are accustomed to identifying the symbols of civilization in architectural terms as large permanent structures. In fact, the ideas and philosophies that are embodied in that form are no different from those that exist in the most transient of our built structures, and even in our understanding of a sense of place where no structure exists at all. Permanent architecture that is intimately connected with its location is in fact very rare indeed, only a handful of buildings from any age are truly site specific. Much of



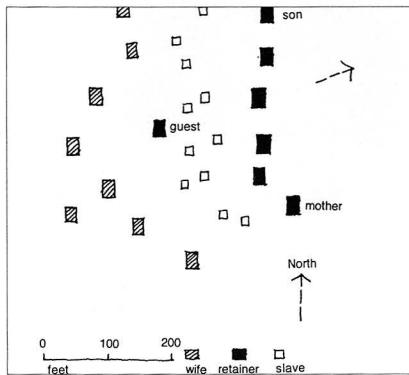
Houseboat in Amsterdam. A sense of place can be identified almost immediately in any location.

the important architecture which civilization has identified as important could in fact exist anywhere, its location a mere accident of economic and social factors contemporary with its construction. This is not just true of individual buildings but of whole cities. All the coastal cities of the USA are situated in places convenient for the landing of a small sailing ship. In an age of instantaneous remote communication, what relevance has that to the meaning of those cities today, except perhaps as of historical interest. Susanne Langer in her book *Feeling and Form* argues that places are culturally defined and that location in the geographic and topographic sense is merely an incidental

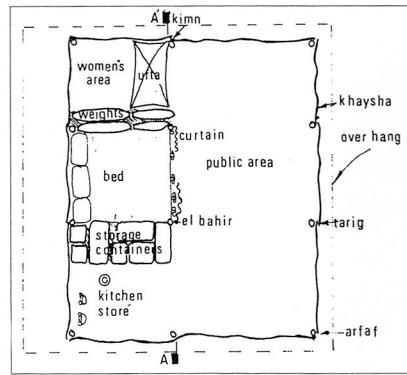
factor in the identification of place.

A ship constantly changing its location is none the less a self-contained place, and so is a gypsy camp, an Indian camp, or a circus camp, however often it shifts its geodetic bearings. Literally we say a camp is in a place, but culturally it is a place. A gypsy camp is a different place from an Indian camp though it may be geographically where the Indian camp used to be.⁴

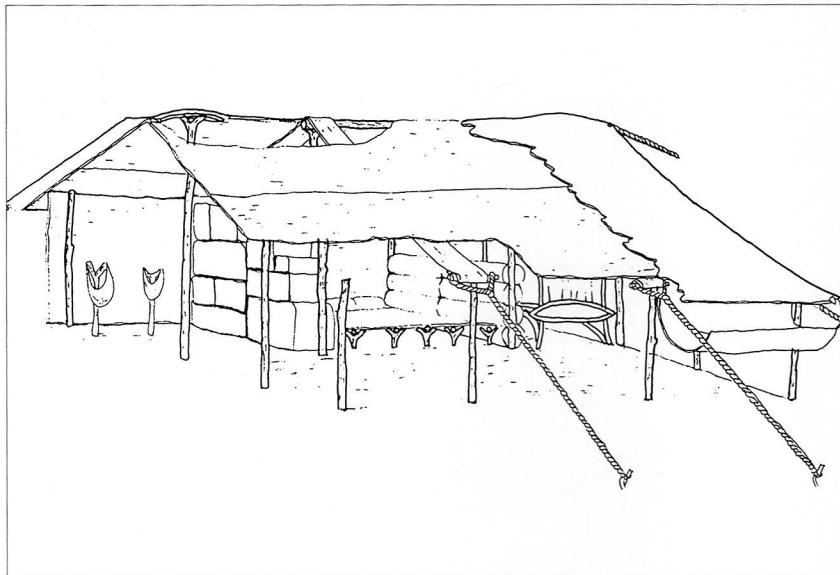
This is not to say that certain distinct geographical places do not have significance for man. The chance occurrences of nature in molding the landscape have resulted in features, or relationships of features, that humans have



Camp layout



Sheik's tent plan



Dwelling patterns of the Kababish nomads of Northern Sudan, typical tent

associated with their own beliefs and have then attached special significance to. The organization of stone circles by prehistoric man, whether for astronomical reasons or otherwise, show a sensitivity to siting in order to emphasize the effect of their construction. The stone circle at Castlerigg in Cumbria, England, is one example of a prehistoric site at the center of a natural bowl of surrounding hills that utilizes the natural 'architecture' to emphasize the man-made. In these circumstances the builders have used their creative skills to utilize the natural elements for their own purposes and have added significance to the place with the erection of their architecture. The architecture is

the catalyst which makes the place recognizable as significant to man.

This example of early man's decision making when selecting sites for the erection of symbolic architecture serves to reinforce the fact that the same process can be undertaken with the erection of all types of architecture regardless of the intention for it to be permanent or temporary. In the case of a migratory Bedouin tribe that transports their entire community from place to place, each encampment leads to an identical erection of the village's buildings. The leader's tent has a significant position that relates to close family members, the followers and the

hangers-on. The hierarchy of the arrangement of the dwellings is established regardless of the location of the encampment. The interior of the tents is also identical; the beds, the social area and the storage compartments being reerected in identical positions at each new camp. The food will come from the same containers and be cooked in the same kitchen area. Even the water, which will come from a different source, will still be drunk from the same cups and be poured from the

architectural form that could fall on the owner while sleeping. The erectors of this temporary architecture go through exactly the same process every time it is erected using important organizational criteria to determine the place, orientation, and site arrangement, creating a 'sense of place' no matter where that place is. In effect, each time the architecture is recreated, the place becomes the same place as before, because the main components of the architecture remain unchanged.



Mobile home on the road in Kansas

same container. The sense of place is finite, determined, and continuous but the geographical location is infinite, undetermined and transitory.

These people still live this way today as they have done for centuries and are resistant to the inevitable pressures for change - they look down on the sedentary dweller living in solid houses, and pity their tenuous and dangerous existence. Tenuous because they must rely upon external uncontrollable factors for their existence; the continuous supply of water in a single place and delivery of food to them rather than finding their own; dangerous because of the investment of resources in a single heavy

Examples of this non-geographically based sense of place in the developed world are not hard to find. Levi-Strauss describes his first voyage to Latin America as; "... the opposite of travel; in that the ship seemed to us not so much a means of transport as a place of residence—a home, in fact, before which Nature put on a new show every morning."⁵

Parallels can be drawn between the transitory lifestyle developed by the settlers of the great mid-west of the USA based on the Calistoga wagon, which can be said to continue in the refined mobile home culture that exists today. Twenty-five percent of all new homes

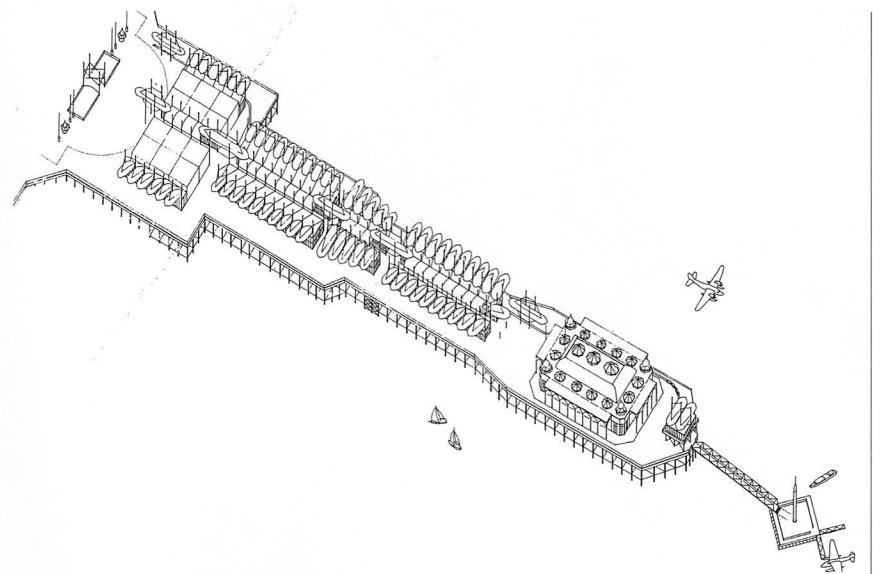
in the USA are provided by mobile home manufacturers and it is estimated that every American family, no matter which type of dwelling they inhabit, will move house on average once every three years. Even more significant is the motor-home culture that has evolved in which the retired community constantly tour the continent equipped with dishwashers and VCR's—the view out of the picture window might be different each evening but home is still the same. These facts about our modern transitory society have led observers to conclude that; "... location or position is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of place, even if it is a very common condition. This is of considerable importance for it demonstrates that mobility or nomadism do not preclude an attachment to place."⁶

Architecture can even exist without the presence of any buildings. Some Aborigine communities of Australia still follow a nomadic lifestyle that is based on a complex understanding of the nature and form of the Australian bush. Each individual has an inherent perception of the sense of place that is not defined by a single object in a specific location, but the journey between locations, a constantly moving 'place', not a route or highway as defined in other cultures by names such as the Appian Way, or Route 66, but a historical and mythical (but still pragmatic) organization of space that

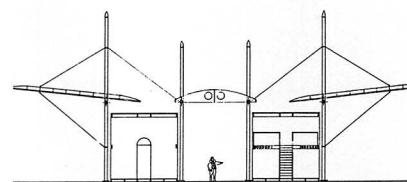
extends over many miles and very different sorts of territory. In each case, the individual may make use of some naturally occurring topographical features in the organization of the route, but the crucial identifying elements are the events in the story or song that describes the journey. The journey is not a conventional one that can be undertaken at speed in order to be completed as soon as possible, or more slowly for leisure, but in a predetermined way that includes specific rituals and processes at defined points. The ways in which rest and shelter occur during this journey can also be significant. The Aborigine builds his architecture with his own actions and movements through space and time, determining the significance of place in relation to his personal requirements, simultaneously identifying the territory associated with his community. The importance of these forms are no less significant to the Aborigine than the local town hall is to a western city dweller, indeed it carries more significance as the Aborigine is personally involved in determining the continuation of his community's existence and territorial rights.

The significance of this realization that the architectural 'sense of place' is not related to a specific geographic location is that it enables designers to contemplate new criteria when devising architectural forms. Certain structures devised for specific functions

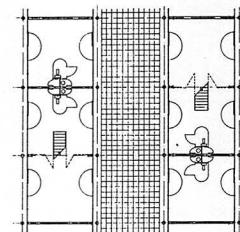
Walbiri Aborigine diagram that represents a cave, in the center, surrounded by an oval camp. The outer semi-circles are four kangaroos that arrived at the camp from different directions, their tracks being indicated by the lines of their tails and hoof prints. A sense of place without architecture.



Hastings Pier arcade : axonometric

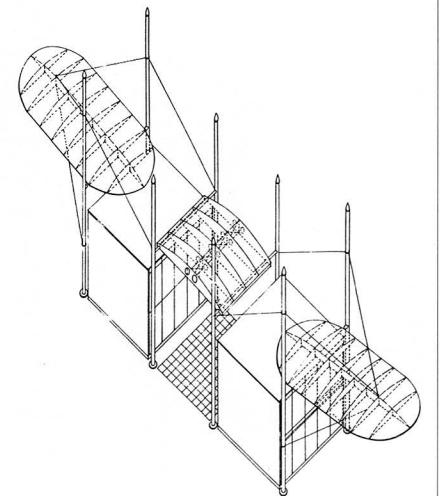


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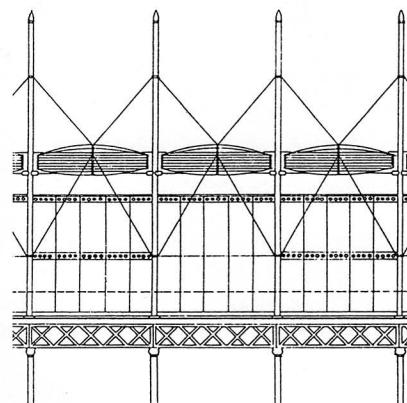


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Arcade details

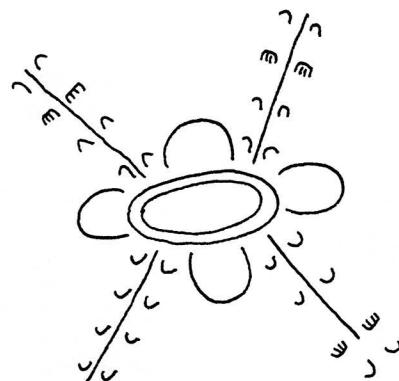


Arcade components: axonometric



Arcade elevation

Hastings Pier, demountable arcade structure, 1990. A lightweight flexible building system that can accept and interact with change and utilizes the advanced technology of the transport industry in the same way that the original nineteenth century structure drew upon the contemporary engineering skills of its age.

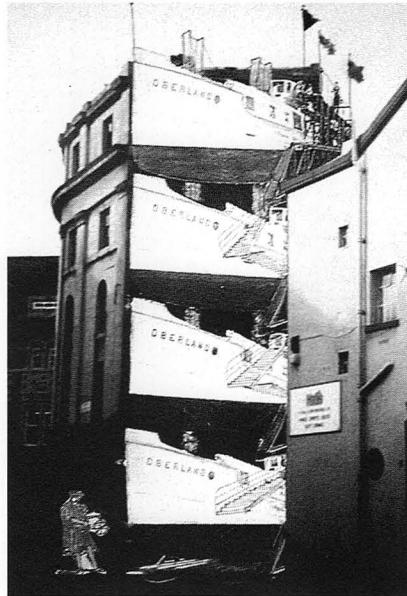


Camp diagram

may be determined with a greater awareness of the economic, social and ecological factors that are available to generate their form. The lightweight temporary building type, if designed correctly, can be created in such a way that it leaves behind its cheap and impermanent image, resulting in the creation of a transitory form that may still be associated with a permanent identity, regardless of geographical location. The notion that the symbolic nature of the form then remains permanent can lead to a greater level of investment in this type of building and result in a higher quality artifact eradicating the image of a throw-away architecture. The concept of a flexible and reusable architecture has obvious benefits in terms of economic use of available resources.

This concept of an identifiable architecture that contains the elements of transience that appear to have become necessity (if only a temporary one) in our society has been the subject of a series of investigative design projects that were inspired by the winning of a competition to provide a portable exhibition building for the Royal Institute of British Architects. The temporary nature of the building meant that it could have access to sensitive sites that would normally not be suitable for a permanent structure. Its speedy erection on its temporary site transformed its erection process from one associated with conventional building, to an event—something to be watched and admired. Its departure left a memory of the site, perceived in a different way from that in which it was seen before; a new possibility for that location, an addition to its history. The building, however, maintained its own history, which it carried with it to its next geographic situation. Though the location was different, the building's history remained the same; its function, contents, personnel, remained unchanged, its message intact.

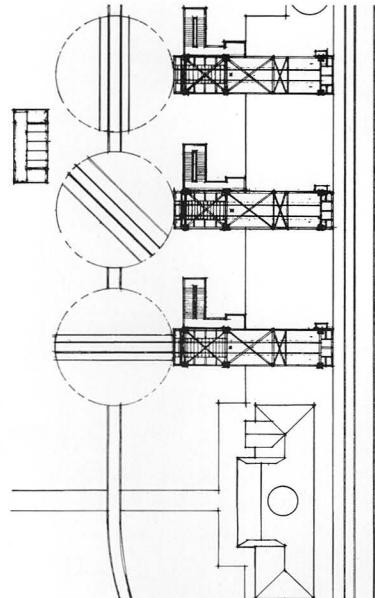
Subsequent projects have dealt with a varied range of issues and problems touching on many of the purposes that contemporary architecture must fulfill; education, commerce, industry, and shelter. Each of these may be solved with a building that has a definitive form, yet leaves its traces in its users' memory rather than rubble, when its use is no longer required. Buildings are an essential cultural requirement of society that form a physical manifestation of the way we live in the world—a transient architecture does not denote a transient society, just one that may be more in tune with the requirements of an appropriate, thoughtful, economic existence. Moving buildings are among



*Demountable Dynamic Dwelling
Liverpool, 1993 (author)*

Living in a city can be anonymous. Many houses are the same, the volume builders seem intent on placing all kinds of different people in variations of a standard house type, because they believe it is cheaper to build that way. Apartments are worse than houses; individualism is only achieved beyond the curtains in the small cube of space allowed.

the earliest artifacts created by man, and have a persisting relevance that enables a Bedouin tent to exist in the same world as a 90,000 ton aircraft carrier, which is a moving home to 5,500 people. The usual perception of temporary architecture is, however, of impermanent, low-quality building, neither tuned to its purpose nor appropriate to its site. A greater understanding of the generation of a sense of place could promote a new ecologically aware design strategy, the benefits of which could be the design of buildings that 'tread lightly on the Earth' and still convey the qualities of identity and continuity that are necessary for an established responsible society.

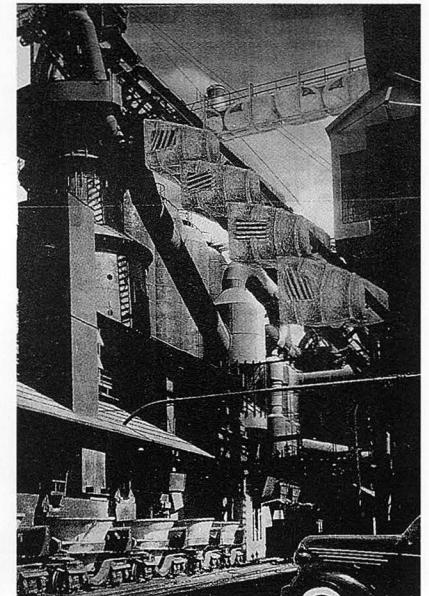


*Vertical railcar dwelling, plan
David Meis, Kansas State University*

These projects aim to provide easily identifiable 'addresses' for the people who are unique city dwellers. With the re-use of redundant, easily identifiable objects, these house designs therefore respect the individual, are environmentally audacious and ecologically sound.

Notes

1. Relph, E., *Place and Placelessness*, London, 1976, p. 78.
2. White, E.B. *Harper's Monthly*, May 1941.
3. Heidegger, Martin., *The Question of Being: An Ontological Consideration of Place*, New York, 1958, p.19.
4. Langer, Susanne, *Feeling and Form*, New York, 1953, p.95.
5. Levi-Strauss, C., *Tristes Tropiques*, New York, 1971, p.66.
6. Relph, p.29.



*Car factory dwelling pods, photomontage
Barb Cole, Kansas State University*

The sites selected are in city streets and areas of varied character and use, now in need of revitalization. Because of the urban location, familiar urban objects have been selected for 'use reassignment'—ships, trains, cars. These are particularly suitable for Liverpool and New York which are ports and centers of communication.