

# Seven Connected Propositions For Those Who Make Places

Llewellyn Seibold

"I recall the beginning as Belief  
It is the time of realization of  
Form.

It is feeling as religion, and  
thought as philosophy.

Then there is no material no  
shape no dimension."

Louis Kahn

## Introduction

In the making of places it is often the unstated first thoughts which determine the direction of subsequent architectural considerations and the dominant compositional characteristics. These beginnings can be rich and full of potential or lifeless and myopic. A beginning has the full potential to become more than a limited set of cultural or personal attitudes when it seeks the primordial realizations of form. For Louis Kahn, this was a continual point of departure since form was not the configured and material object but the search for institutions fundamental to life. These notions are helpful, for then one can restate the most often asked question of "What does one do?" into a prior question which asks *why* one desires to make places. In Kahn's terms this seems to be the "beginning as Belief." A commitment to the study and practice of the architectural discipline must rest in a conviction that the making of meaningful places is fundamental and necessary to man's dwelling. The following propositions propose a basis for

this belief through a series of linked thoughts about the constituents of dwelling place within the context of creative intention.

It is possible to see dwelling as an involvement in the thematic patterns and processes of the life-world we experience. The underlying premise of the following propositions is that dwelling is an act, which represents the question which asks what the essential order is of our universal and particular worlds. Potential answers lie within the question, as methods of inquiry lie in the principles which animate and make conscious the act of dwelling. Within the making of rooms, houses, gardens, and streets lie precise manifestations of the inquiry and subsequent ways of dwelling. These forms require continuous evaluation as we check their characteristics against meaningful experience. We owe a great deal to those who have confronted the question of dwelling and applied themselves to making places which embody a convincing spirit.

Works of those educated in the formal discipline of architecture, as well as folk builders, will be used as examples furthering our understanding of each proposition.

1. To Build, to Plant, and to Restore Affirms Dwelling

Building, planting, and restoring be-

come affirmations of dwelling when they serve principal and tangible meanings within our houses, gardens, cities and landscapes.<sup>1</sup> The establishment of a group's commitment to a locale serves a primary need to focus the task of finding the best and highest good for places. A belief about dwelling in a particular place spawns a constructive concern and care for the elements of the environment which give meaning and support to experience. At times we are reminded, by destructive results, of those designers and users whose commitment to places had been transitory or disinterested.

Many vernacular settlements show us that the question of what it means to dwell has been actively pursued and that a belief in a particular place has been established. The clay-walled buildings of the Germans from Russia, an immigrant group on the North American Plains, portray this affirmation of dwelling in a place (Figure 1). By physical necessity these low, thick-walled buildings submit to the order of the landscape and existent material sources within a sphere of complex cultural ideals. They express a commitment to find and inhabit those places which would support the long held vocation of planting prairie soils with wheat. Dwelling is more than instinct for shelter or territory, but becomes a means of inquiry which brings us to question what kind of attitude is held about a place.



1. German-Russian Mennonite dwelling.



2. Temple.

2. Dwelling Reveals the Order of the World and Establishes a Measure of Man

Artifacts and constructions provide a concrete way of knowing what man's attitude and world view are. The ephemeral ideals of culture take on a more precise measure when one considers the place as one of constructed forms. A comparative study of culture and form is useful to those who make places, for patterns of understanding emerge which can clarify the more universal aspects of place experience. It may also confirm that the designer is indeed communicating the intention and meaning of a particular body of people.

The concrete measure of man relative to an extended inquiry into the distant and recent past can also be examined. Today's design thought benefits from the perspective of time and a study of historical types. Again, the comparative measure allows one to condense a working understanding of essential concerns by the recognition of patterns in the intention and realization of places. Martin Heidegger insightfully states in his discourse on the Greek Temple, "The temple, in standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves" (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> By its physical presence which comes from the material of the world and its respect for the disposition of structural integrity, it embodies a measure of those processes which are held in equilibrium. At the same time it also contains the human inspiration and desire to become by portraying its type of being. Within these constructions are wrapped an essential concept which is a sense of place.

### 3. The Measure of Man is His Sense of Place

Man's sense of place is two-fold in that it is simultaneously centered and open to the world.<sup>3</sup> First, experience must be positioned by identifying with and belonging to a place. This is commonly identified as a sense of residing. More than commitment, this is a sense that one's identity is bound in a place. Evidence of this is given by our asking new acquaintances where they are from so as to understand something basic about their personality. In the making of places, the concrete representation of specific local environmental characteristics is a means of identification with a place. Second, experience must be open. This is done by observing and understanding the general characteristics that a particular place has in common with other places. These understandings are made concrete by more systematized ideals which can be passed

through time and across cultural lines. There exists the need to identify by finding differences and the need to participate by finding commonality.

The windows of Quebec provide an example of this two-fold sense (Figure 3). A distinct individual identity results from the care that is given to the flowers and lace which adorn the window opening. On another scale, cultural identity is seen in the use of particular colors on door surfaces and window frames. This is part of a more prevalent cultural identity in the Province of Quebec. Last, the window's basic pattern belongs to a family of forms recognized as windows or portals—the openings in the wall, the eye of the house. Both reveal and conceal the life beyond.

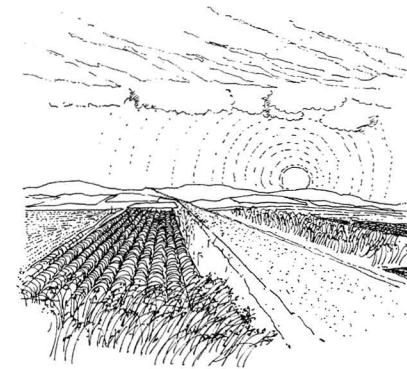
### 4. Place is Shaped by Experiential Understanding

The experience of places occurs in a series of environmental levels from a favorite chair, to house, to neighborhood, to city, to landscape.<sup>4</sup> These places make up the totality of our environmental experience. Observations which are personally appropriated become the best means of understanding the relationship between the many layers of existence.

The recollection of a favored place can be recalled and analyzed for the constituent physical characteristics which allow particular experiences to happen. It becomes difficult to imagine an experience without having some recollection of the place in which it occurred. When asked to recall memories most of us can bring to mind some place which is deeply imprinted in our consciousness. The experiences of childhood are most poignant. Figure 4 is an image of a place which contained a rich experience for me as a child. What is shown is a view of newly planted, rolling agricultural land, a dominant horizon line and a vaulting deep blue sky. I recall



3. Window of Quebec.



4. The road and landscape.

walking down an endless ribbon of road at the end of a summer's day. The road traced the imaginary lines of the system of cardinal points which order this world. This expansive landscape of limitless extension provoked question after question. What was beyond forever? Who resided in the *place* beyond forever? The landscape constituents and their relationship surely contained the impetus for these type of questions.

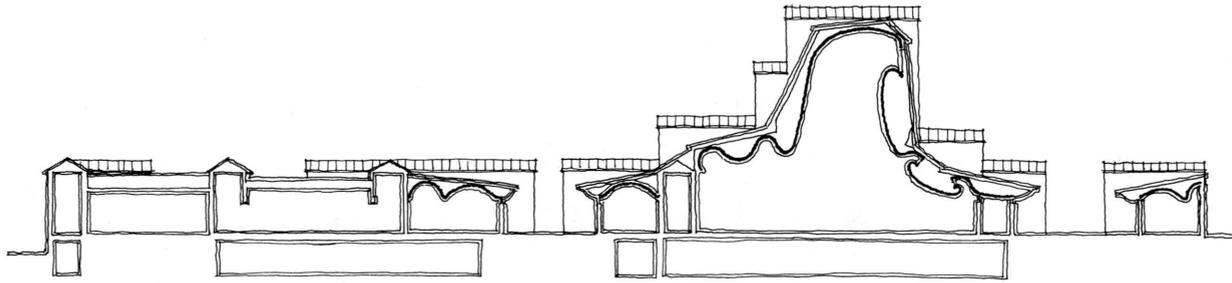
### 5. Understanding Searches: What One Does, Where One Does, and How One Does.

This proposition begins to move toward a more complete and unified body of working thoughts. Three categories of concern can be engaged by the maker of places as generative thought is given to the art of designing.<sup>5</sup>

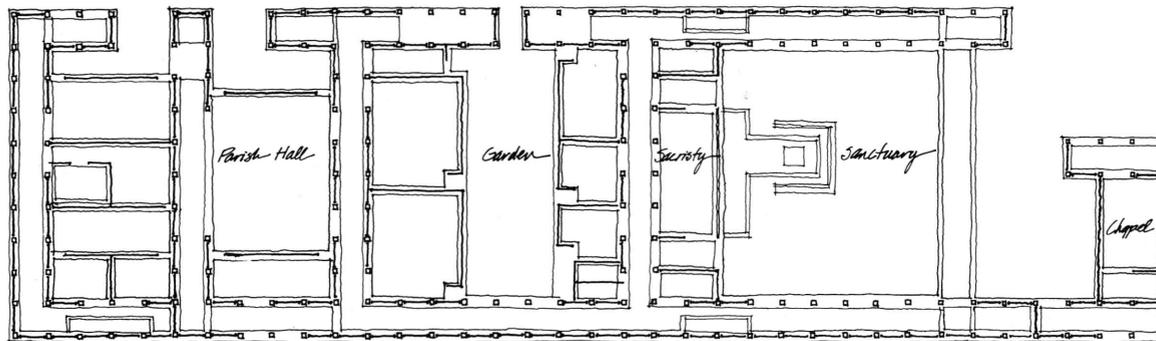
**What (Typology)**  
This is the inner vocation, or the will to be engaged in, architectural work. It forms the essential patterns and existential structures of our world. In physical constructions these become the essence of human institutions. One may ask, for instance, what is the essential nature of a city, or what is it to gather and participate in our collective and private lives. This allows us to identify forms as a place of individual nurture, a place of commerce, a place of worship, or a place of government.

**Where (Topology)**  
This is the positional structure which allows us to be oriented and to recognize spatial configuration. Topology is primarily known through the movement (directional), or repose (centered), of spatial structures. The idealized sectional division of the Great Plains based upon the cardinal points becomes a primary means of referencing a position in a landscape with few distinct landmarks.

**How (Morphology)**  
This is the character, spirit, and identity of form. Fundamentally an atmosphere is invoked, which is a result of material types, structure, and the manner of construction. An example of this can be seen in the room where one is at a particular moment. By maintaining a constant position the atmosphere of room can be changed by altering its color, materials, and manner of assembly. Thus the room may be said to be either utilitarian, opulent, or contemplative.



5. Bagsvaerd Church, section.



6. Bagsvaerd Church, plan.

The Bagsvaerd Church by Jorn Utzon is an example which shows thoughtful consideration of all these concerns.<sup>6</sup> The fundamental nature of a place to gather and worship is established within a dualistic typological framework. The Deity as transcendent is built concretely into the form of the building's section, drawing upon the metaphors of light, sky, and clouds (Figure 5). The Deity as immanent and local is developed in the central nature of gathering places as shown in plan. The central path contains a critical unity of these essential types as it ends the passage and reaches upward in a cross. Within these forms and element scales is contained the duality of transcendence and immanence in the Christian tradition. The basic topological structure sets up a very direct order of passages which connect and enclose the places of repose (Figure 6). The morphological order invokes an atmosphere of controlled directness and contemplation through the use of material and manner of workmanship (Figure 7).

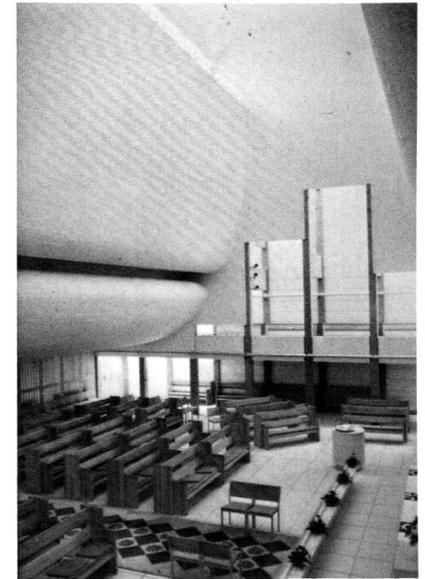
tention Distinguishes Order by the Act of Separating and Gathering

Patterns of form, shape, and order proceed from the recognition of thematic wholes—a sense for overall outcomes rather than transient change. The potential energy of the creative act is stored by thought which discriminates and groups thematic patterns. An analysis of various creation accounts in literature can be helpful in understanding the act and meanings associated with bringing together the patterns which support dwelling. The familiar Genesis account portrays the separation and gathering of light from darkness, vapor above from below, and water from earth.<sup>7</sup> A cosmos is formed from chaos. The relationship of constituent elements—water, earth, vapor, and light—form a variety of orders upon which our experience of landscapes is based. Within the constituent elements are contained the characteristics which give meaning and purpose to phenomenal existence. As time is given by the duration in the presence of light and dark it also becomes a figure of the known and unknown. Earth becomes the

substance of our sustenance while water becomes the progenitor force, a giver of life. Vapor above separated from vapor below begins to suggest the important orientational discrimination of up from down.

Stockholm's Woodland Cemetery by Swedish architects Asplund and Lewerentz is a discrete gathering of the elements of earth, water, sky and light into a pattern of meaningful order. Within a pervasive forest texture, a central path is laid which gathers a meadow around it (Figure 8). As this path moves toward the center of the cemetery's domain, a poignant image of a gently rising knoll, a placid pool of water, and a dark silhouetted cross, emerges from the carefully gathered elements of the crematorium's edge (Figure 9). The skillful combination of dark and light, rising and falling, earth, water, and sky speak to both universal and particular types of experience. The separation and gathering of elemental units of world portray a coherent existential order within this work.

7. By Separating and Gathering the Edge Becomes Placed

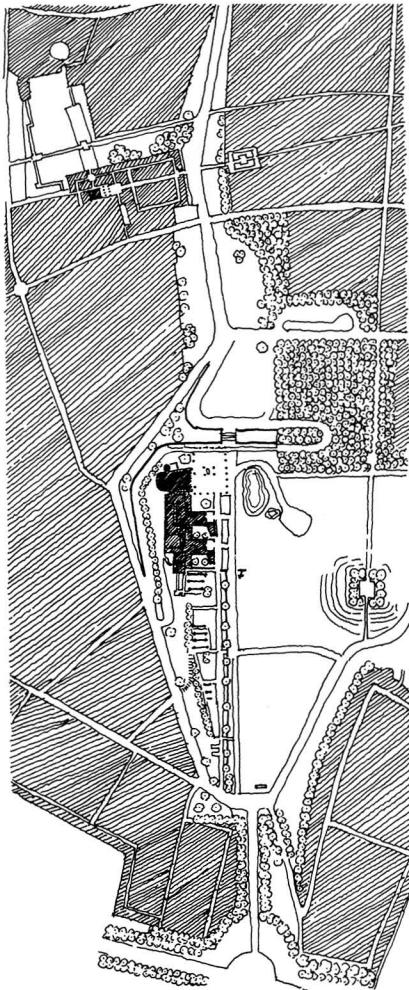


7. Bagsvaerd Church, interior.

Moving from the potential energy of the creative intention, the placing of the edge is the first step toward the actualization of intended thought. Heidegger's definition of an edge or boundary is helpful, for it names it as the place at which something begins its presencing.<sup>8</sup> Edges gather presence by placement and relationship. The act of placing an edge is manifest in the gesture of a hand holding a tool on paper or the marking of edges directly on the earth as in folk cultures. This is the seminal act from which the making of places proceeds as an inquiry into the nature of dwelling. It is with this beginning that "placemaking" potential can be studied and tested in relation to the pattern of responses which need to be made. Louis Kahn's labored process sketches show a response which seeks to discriminate and gather the order of a place by the continual testing of the relative placement of edges. Placemaking is deserving of this attention for it uncovers the measure of our commitment as an affirmation of dwelling and expresses the implicit belief we hold about our being in a greater place.

Conclusion

From the all important placement of



8. Woodland Cemetery, plan.

an edge one begins to elaborate, define, redefine, and develop design intention. It is useful to slide with facility from parts to the whole and back to parts. As the relationship of the building to the landscape is studied, the method of joining brick to window frame may be deliberated. From an attitude of inquiry, one searches for an essence which will pervade the work and carry it forward with an inner momentum. The progressive revealing of form as a design method relies on careful attention in the act of consideration and the study of intention through a variety and scale of notational types: modeled, drawn, and verbal. This progressive and cyclical search for form is favored over a method which defines a quantitative or stylistic interpretation of form. Needed more than a predetermined end, is a set of guides which can be



9. Woodland Cemetery.

used to generate and check the underlying integrity of the work. The following are couplets which represent a range of dialectic thought frames which can be engaged in the act of making places.

Cosmos and Chaos

The meaningful order and the purposeless disorder  
(a check for unity)

Immanence and Transcendence

The profane and the sacred  
(a check for experience and essences)

Spirit and Reason

The verve of vision and the discipline of system  
(a check of spirit and inner logic)

Universal and Particular

The generic and the local  
(a check for archetypes and socio/cultural meanings)

Timeless and Temporal

The permanent and the transitory  
(a check for longevity and immediacy)

Form and Circumstance

The ordering principle and the programmatic necessity  
(a check for principle order and program response)

Duration and Interval

The rhythmic figure and the repetitive ground

(a check for continuity)

Major and Minor

The greater and the lesser  
(a check for hierarchical distinction)

Dark and Light

The presence of darkness and the presence of light  
(a check for characteristic and intensity)

Passage and Repose

The directional and the centered  
(a check for shape, directionality, linkage or interpretation)

Large and Small

The monumental, the human, and the miniature  
(a check for scale)

Open and Closed

The portal and the wall  
(a check for edge characteristics—layered, implied, overlapping, or definitive)

Within and Without

The garden and the prospect  
(a check for density and grouping)

Here and There

The relative position and dimensional configuration  
(a check for spatial orientation and proportion)

Rising and Falling

The up and the down  
(a check of vertical relationship and meanings)

By addressing the question of dwelling we reaffirm our commitment to places—a commitment which both identifies us and opens us to the processes of the local and general worlds of being. The preceding propositions, dialectic couplets, and exemplar works need also to be contained within an established pattern of inquiry which needs to be checked for its usefulness in the making of places. Unless we pose significant questions about the nature of dwelling, the prospect for places which ring with convincing qualities is not good. With the investment of care in the search for what it means to dwell, fine rooms will be built, wonderful gardens will be planted, and we will restore our collective landscape.

NOTES

1. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York, 1980, 50.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, edited by A. Hofstadter, New York, 1971, 43.
3. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 78.
4. Yi-Fu Tuan, "Place an Experiential Perspective," *Geographical Review*, 65, 1975, 151–65.
5. These categories are a summation adapted from an article by Christian Norberg-Schulz, "Kahn, Heidegger and the Language of Architecture," *Oppositions* 8, 1979.
6. A discussion of the Bagsvaerd Church is contained in an essay by Norberg-Schulz published as part of the series, *Global Architecture: Church at Bagsvaerd*, edited and photographed by Yukio Futagawa, Tokyo, 1981.
7. This account can be found in *The Bible*, Genesis 1:1–10.
8. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 154.