

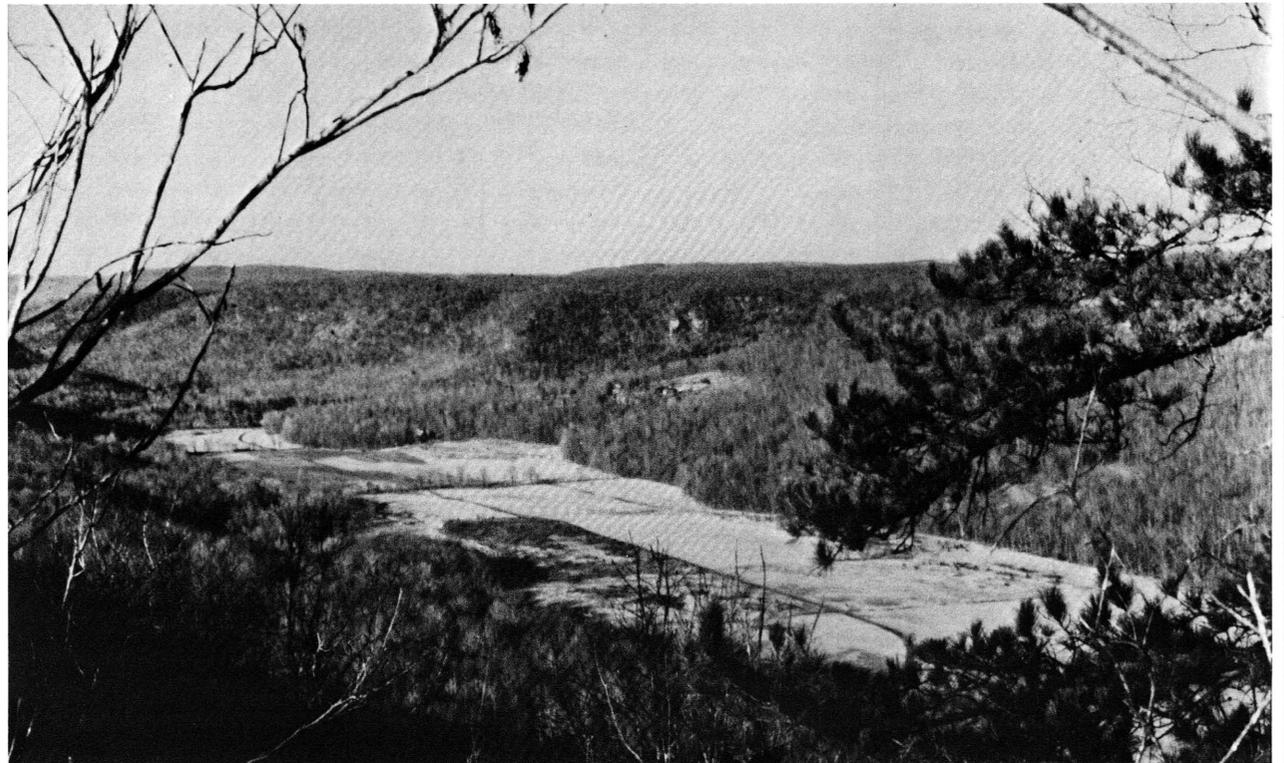
Toward a Phenomenology of Place and Place-Making:

Interpreting Landscape, Lifeworld and Aesthetics

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Places and place-making are two significant notions in current environmental and architectural literature. Phenomenological research, which is concerned with the essential nature of human experience and consciousness, indicates that the notion of place crystallizes and focuses one essential aspect of human existence—the inescapable requirement to always be somewhere. Place as a concept integrates natural, personal and cultural dimensions of environment into one experiential whole. As Edward Relph explains, places are “fusions of human and natural order... and the significant centres of our immediate experiences of the world.”¹ It is the gathering and centering quality of place which gives the notion its considerable synthesizing strength.

There are many ways in which place and place-making can be explored phenomenologically. This essay delineates place in terms of three aspects: first, a sense of landscape; second, a sense of human lifeworld; and third, a sense of experiential aesthetics. To locate these three themes practically, the essay discusses them in relation to an upper-level design-studio project at Kansas State University focusing on the Meadowcreek Project, a multi-disciplinary learning community in the Ozarks region of Arkansas. This essay does not present actual design schemes for Meadowcreek but, rather, indicates broad questions and themes which need to be addressed



View of Meadowcreek Valley.

in identifying the underlying sense of place for the Ozarks region as a whole and the Meadowcreek site itself. The hope is that such an outline might suggest possibilities to other researchers and designers who are interested in an experiential approach to place and place-making.

Background

Now four years old, the Meadowcreek project is a learning community

which is also a living laboratory for the practice of “right livelihood”; it supports itself economically through a balanced mix of tuition, gardens and orchards, and renewable-energy businesses, including a sawmill and wood shop. Eventually, a resident community of approximately fifty student interns and fifteen permanent staff will engage in a balanced multi-disciplinary program of research, teaching, and learning, as well as through involvement in the Meadowcreek land-based businesses. As with

similar “New-Age” communities, a major aim is nurturing personal and community growth within a context of ecological and regional responsibility and sustenance.²

At present, Meadowcreek is completing the first phase of an extensive construction program, which includes a 12,000 square foot conference and research center and housing for fifty students and guest faculty. All buildings are solar heated, passively cooled, and constructed partially

from trees grown and milled at Meadowcreek. Design work in our studio will encompass large-scale, long-term comprehensive planning, the development of small-scale outdoor places joining existing and proposed buildings, and the siting and design of such proposed facilities as staff housing, a food-processing center, and a retail outlet for community businesses. Since part of the Meadowcreek curriculum will be concerned with the ongoing design and management of the Meadowcreek facilities and landscape, it is important that this process of incremental growth be integrated into a social, ecological and aesthetic larger whole.

This need for integration is one reason we have chosen to adapt the principles of Christopher Alexander's "Pattern Language" as a model for both long-term growth and individual project development.³ In a sense, the class will be devising and testing a process for designing rather than merely producing a comprehensive plan. Alexander's pattern language is also an appropriate structure for realizing another major course objective: learning how to see and design the relationship among physical, spatial, and experiential aspects of place.

Clear seeing is the basis for good design, and design is a good way to develop clear seeing. To promote this aim practically, our studio is organ-

ized around three thematic areas: a phenomenology of landscape, life-world, and aesthetics. Each of these three themes reflects and focuses on one crucial aspect of place, and their sum should offer an environmental whole grounded in ecological, human, and communal needs.

A Sense of Landscape

In conventional environmental research and design, landscape is typically examined in terms of its parts: geology, hydrology, climate, topography, soil, vegetation, animal life, and so forth. Information is then correlated statistically or graphically, and the result is an objective picture of the physical environment that provides an important basis for design and planning decisions. Even in a systems approach, landscape is still only the sum of environmental parts and relationships. A phenomenological perspective argues that landscape is synergistic—its environmental parts and interrelationships generate an atmosphere, spirit, or character which is greater, but less visible than its material parts and their sum. A major aim in the Meadowcreek design studio is to develop sensitization exercises which are grounded in firsthand experience of the Meadowcreek site. This will foster awareness of landscape character.

A first step toward this sensitization is

introducing students to phenomenological seeing. The phenomenological researcher attempts to view a thing in terms of how it would describe itself if it could speak.⁴ One useful context for promoting such awareness is the way Goethe viewed science, especially in the set of experiential color experiments he provided in *Theory of Colours*.⁵ Although Goethe's main aim was to establish a theory of light and color grounded in human experience, his work is significant in promoting more sensitive seeing because it helps students to break free of preconceptions and see the thing—in this case, color—as it is in itself. Once attuned to a phenomenological approach to looking, students can next apply this way of looking to landscape elements, such as light, color, geology, topography, water, weather, and so forth. A thorough phenomenology of landscape would require a detailed phenomenological portrait of individual landscape elements. Our hope is that through work which investigates a few substantive foci, such as water and light in the landscape, students will establish a method of seeing that contributes to an overall sense of the Meadowcreek's landscape and environmental character.

In the studio, for example, we will emphasize a phenomenology of water; streams and rivers, particularly in their interaction with the limestones and dolomites of the region, play an im-

portant role in setting the landscape character of the Ozarks. The phenomenological research on water done by Theodore Schwenk will be used as a guide to explore the ways in which water and land interact to contribute to Meadowcreek's sense of place.⁶ Similar awareness exercises drawn from Kimon Nicolaidis and R. Murray Schafer will be used to establish an understanding of other landscape elements such as light, wind, sound, topography, vegetation, and their interrelationships.⁷ These exercises will focus on such questions as: In what way do earth and sky meet in the Meadowcreek region? What sense of scale and rhythm does the landscape suggest?

A second component of phenomenology of landscape is a holistic sense and description of Meadowcreek's environmental character. What this portrait might be cannot be clearly specified presently, yet one important possibility is what Christian Norberg-Schulz terms the *romantic landscape*—an environment of variation and diversity which generates a sense of many places, as is the case, for example, with Scandinavian forests.⁸ As Rafferty says of the Ozarks, "There are countless ridges, hills, valleys, branches, hollows, coves, caves, springs, creeks, rivers...that call for names."⁹ Clearly, this varied landscape is greatly different than what Norberg-Schulz terms the *cosmic landscape* of desert steppe—or plain—an

environment of vast, homogeneous extent and uniformity.¹⁰

Different landscapes evoke different characters and senses of place. In the design studio we will work to identify the Ozark character and establish it as one important base for the Meadowcreek design. The hope is that a phenomenological awareness of landscape will provide one means to identify a design which is ecologically in tune with the region and also to indicate forms and layouts which would echo and support the landscape character.

A Sense of Human Lifeworld

The *lifeworld* is a person and group's world of taken-for-grantedness and is normally unnoticed and unquestioned. The phenomenologist works to separate himself from the lifeworld and to make it an object of direct attention.¹¹ The lifeworld of Meadowcreek is grounded in its efforts to establish in self-conscious fashion a community which works ecologically, psychologically, and socially. The "taken-for-grantedness" of the Meadowcreek community must be planned and guided in such a way, therefore, so that an ecological and interpersonal harmony is promoted as much as possible—particularly through natural, casual activities, and routines to which residents and visitors relate to unselfconsciously.

Particularly significant in this regard is the way that physical space and spatial patterns set horizons to the dynamics of place, especially in regard to sight, sound and physical passage. Space has the ability to join human movements together into a larger individual movements into isolated spatial units that do not interact visually, acoustically, or bodily. Passage within and between buildings and building clusters can be understood in terms of how who meets whom, at what locations, how often. Here, place is considered in terms of human togetherness or isolation. As a community emphasizing interpersonal learning and sharing, it is crucial for the Meadowcreek design to promote as much informal sociability as possible because it is often the unplanned face-to-face meetings that lead to exchanges and plans which would not occur otherwise.¹²

In exploring the ways in which the architectural environment can support casual interpersonal interaction, our work in the design studio will look in two directions: first, to the lifeworld of Ozark natives and their vernacular architecture and settlement patterns; second, to various themes in phenomenological environmental psychology. A phenomenology of the Ozark vernacular lifeworld examines the realm of historical, unselfconscious community—the organization of informal community networks in the



On the valley floor.

region.¹³ In addition, consideration of traditional building forms and settlement types may suggest ways a vernacular architecture in tune with the Ozark environment was derived.

In looking at work in phenomenological environmental psychology, it is important to consider that which has attempted to harmonize physical, interpersonal, and social dimensions of space and physical environment.¹⁴ The design key would appear to be a spatial arrangement of interior

spaces, buildings, paths, open spaces and work areas which support in the ordinary course of daily activities a frequent opportunity for people to meet informally and, so to speak, accidentally. In identifying and better understanding the kinds of spaces and places that a community like Meadowcreek should have, use of Alexander's pattern language may be particularly helpful, since it presents experiential needs in terms of physical environment and suggests how design can support those needs.

A Sense of Experiential Aesthetics

A phenomenology of architectural aesthetics argues that particular building forms, spaces, and surfaces evoke corresponding experiential and symbolic qualities. One practical route toward such awareness is phenomenological study of natural forms, patterns, and processes and the ways which they have been imitated—unselfconsciously or consciously—in vernacular and religious architecture.¹⁵ Goethe's approach to science can again play an important role here, since it provides a clear experiential demonstration that external forms and processes reflect inner psychological patterns, and that the natural world reflects a deeper world of spirit. A phenomenology of design which incorporates aesthetics asks how architectural form can manifest and reflect higher realities; this relationship should be particularly important for a "New-Age" community like Meadowcreek. Here, research in sacred space and architecture are important guideposts.¹⁶

Meadowcreek is committed environmentally and communally to what the philosopher Martin Heidegger calls "sparing and preserving"—the kindly regard for things, creatures, places and people as they are and can become.¹⁷ A phenomenology of aesthetics suggests that the physical and architectural environment has a major role in generating a sense of psycho-

logical and spiritual well-being. It is, therefore, important to become sensitive to the way that architectural form, space, and surface foster heightened awareness and satisfaction. One instructive example here is the work of Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, who considers the symbolic significance of various spaces and forms. He then uses this as a basis for designing Egyptian peasant housing.¹⁸ In his house plans, for example, the courtyard is significant not only for its environmental and social functions. Also, it works symbolically, joining earth with sky, drawing down the divine into the everyday world of the peasant: "The sky is, as it were, pulled down into intimate contact with the house, so that the spirituality of the home is constantly replenished from heaven."¹⁹ An aim in the Meadowcreek design is to identify similar architectural elements which might provide effective symbols reflecting both the natural landscape and philosophical aims of Meadowcreek.

Conclusion

A phenomenology of place must be holistic, joining qualities of nature and physical environment with qualities of humanness and human community. A phenomenology of place indicates that dimensions of the natural world support and reflect dimensions of people's psychological, social, cultural and spiritual worlds. The aim in

terms of design is an architecture which is attuned to place and people environmentally, humanely, and spiritually. An architectural element "works" to the degree that it can pierce through the ecological and human aspects of world, mirrors, supports, and can enhance them tangibly. The present need is to join conceptual and practical directions through projects dealing with real places. The hope is that the Meadowcreek experience will provide one such possibility leading to a design that arises from and supports place.

NOTES

1. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London, 1976, 141.
2. Gary J. Coates, ed., *Resettling America: Energy, Ecology and Community*, Andover, Massachusetts, 1981.
3. Christopher Alexander, *The Oregon Experiment*, New York, 1975; *Christopher Alexander, A Pattern Language*, New York, 1977; Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*, New York, 1979.
4. Edward Relph, "Seeing, Thinking, and Describing Landscapes," in Thomas Saarinen, David Seamon, and James Sell, eds., *Environmental Perception and Behavior: Inventory and Prospect*, Chicago, 1984, in press.
5. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, Cambridge, 1970; on Goethe's science as a means of promoting environmental sensitivity, see David Seamon, "Goethe's Way of Science: Implications for Environmental Theory and Education," in *Humanistic Geography*, David Ley and Marwyn Samuels, eds., Chicago, 1978, 238–250.
6. Theodore Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos*, New York, 1976.
7. Kimon Nicolaidis, *The Natural Way to Draw*, Boston, 1941; R. Murray Schafer,

- The Tuning of the World*, New York, 1977.
8. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York, 1980, 42–43.
9. Milton D. Rafferty, *The Ozarks: Land and Life*, Norman, Oklahoma, 1980, 42–43.
10. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 45–47.
11. David Seamon, *A Geography of the Lifeworld*, New York, 1979.
12. See Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, Cambridge, 1982.
13. Compare Carlene F. Bryant, "Family Group Organization in a Cumberland Mountain Neighborhood," in *Appalachia and America*, Allen Batteau, ed., Lexington, 1983, 28–47.
14. See, for example, Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York, 1961; Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor*, Chicago, 1973; William Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Washington, D.C., 1979; Oscar Newman, *Community of Interest*, New York, 1980.
15. On the geometry of natural forms and processes, see, for example, D'Arcy W. Thompson, *On Growth and Form*, London, 1961; Matila Ghyka, *The Geometry of Art and Life*, New York, 1977; Gyorgy Doxzi, *The Power of Limits: Proportional Harmonies in Nature, Art and Architecture*, Boulder, Colorado, 1981.
16. For a review of this work, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, New York, 1981; also, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York, 1959; Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity*, Chicago, 1973; Keith Critchlow, *Time Stands Still*, London, 1979; Robert Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry*, New York, 1979.
17. Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language and Thought*, Albert Hofstadter, trans., New York, 1971, 145–161; Edward Relph, *Rational Landscapes and Humanistic Geography*, London, 1981.
18. Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor*.
19. *Ibid.*, 56.