

The Kinship of Built Things

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As corporeal things we shape other things in ways that are constant with our being. Our activity on the earth as builders cause us to build; we as material things making other material things full of their *own* form, texture, smell, and structure, each standing on their own as things in the world. In this way, our built works are first of all things, resonating in their own distinct and tangible materiality. These things in their own self-showing open up worlds, and in so doing attach us to *the* world. As such, these things that we make are never neutral and uninvolved with the way we are. In a Heideggerian sense, we find our location in the world through these things that we have put in it. Because of this, these self-standing works do much more than merely serve our

needs by protecting and assisting us as we daily go about our lives. More significantly, they stand ready to offer us self-reflection; their palpable quality poised in their own constancy, making for us a material document wholly wrapped up in the reality of human constructing.

To acknowledge this fundamental kinship, means to expand our potential; not only as builders but as human beings who are on the earth, and a part of it. Through building we come to understand ourselves. That's because the materiality of con-structing has the potential to describe how we are; and in doing so, to open us to a deep and steady inquiry, responding to and embracing our very being. This is the most





crucial condition within the activity of building-thinking, for it opens up a space for reflection. Reflectively responding to our built things lets us avoid indifference which is crucially

important, for standing against not-feeling makes explicit the impact that the world has upon the heart. Whether mindful of it or not, all of us who build do so in large part so

that we may come closer to the sharp intensity of that which surrounds us—the realness of the world.

Merleau-Ponty describes this intertwined alliance with the world as depending, not just on these things that we make but as well, upon our own materiality: “my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things... are encrusted in its flesh, they are a part of its full definition; the world is made of the

very stuff of the body.”¹ In this way then, we too are in the material world as full fleshy things. Through this palpable thinking form we all possess, our senses immediately and intuitively experience that which is before us. We know the materiality of things only because of our own physicality. Because of our tangible physicality, we are inextricably a part of, and dependent on this earth, forever wedded to it. Yet, while our bodies attach us to the earth, our thinking which makes its own world, inevitably stands *outside* this pure raw physicality. So, what we conceive about things is beyond the tangible,



outside the earth. In other words, what we think about things remains *extra-terrestrial*, and consequently distinct from the earth. Yet, it's always the physical human body which acts as the conduit to bring us back, to ground us; enabling us to transfer what was "in-there" to the "out-here." Our own corporeal materiality brings what was merely an idea into the fullness of material presence. Because of this, the living palpable human being is put *into* the world, not outside it as distinct, but in

accord with it. Within this freedom, the perceptive human is no longer the original standard by which all else is regarded, but instead "a thing among things."

As such, we don't lose significance, rather we gain association. In other words, we have the potential to find our place in the world through reflectively responding to the built physicality of all that encircles our lives. Everywhere we turn the opportunity awaits us; us and





things coequal and co-responsive. As example, think about something as unassuming as a simple screened door. This door was built to make our passage through the world as agreeable as possible. It is there to assist us in our need. This can't be disputed. Yet as a material thing it responds to more than just this functional capability. It offers us something about ourselves; the manner in which it *gives* of itself. The door is a gift that is in accord with our presence in the world. When

standing before this screened door, we understand that we must have a certain deftness, since someone like us was able to make such a thing in the first place. The door as a humanmade thing tells us that our bodies are agile enough; that our hands and muscles have the right amount of dexterity and strength to shape and form such a work. The same screened door also reveals that we must be capable of moving about; that we are mobile; our passing through the world exemplified there

in the existence of the screened door. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to move through things like walls which the door is a part of. Which, in turn lets us know that we must be solid. Since in its being a door—as an opening—it immediately discloses that we're unable to pass through other solid forms—like walls for instance. To move through certain conditions of the world, we require the openness that a door affords. That's why we make things like doors in the first place.

The shape of the door likewise proclaims that we're connected to the world vertically; the door's shape oriented uprightly informs us that we too stand erect as we move through the world. Through the same screened door we also come to understand that our bodies need protecting; refuge and relief from the many kinds of pesky flying insects that would make a meal of us on a hot summer afternoon. Similarly, the door announces that we desire the cooling breeze that it allows into our home. As we continue to reflect on the screened door this way, we also take note of the location and shape of the simple cast-iron handle, and the fact that the door has hinges. On reaching out for the handle, we immediately understand that some part of our body grasps and makes a particular kind of movement—a pulling or a pushing—as is necessary to open and close this door. The handle and hinges in being capable this way offer themselves according to our desire.

These same hinges and handle also attach us to greater conditions of world, reminding us that through our own physicality, we are able to draw ore from the earth; to fire it at very high temperatures and refine it; and then to forge it into a shape that suits our hand. There is also the screen-cloth which makes up most of the surface of the door. In its gentle intricateness it lets us know that we can make sophisticated and complex machines, able to produce such gossamer things. As we run our hands over the pithy worn wood which is the door's stile and rail, we delight in its hue and softness of touch. And we could go on in describing the kinship that we find in the door. But with what we've already said, we see the many ways that the door offers itself to us, recounting that our bodies are solid and mobile, fragile and temporal; that we need its relaxing breezes;

and that we want the protection of its guardianship.

Yet this is not all that a built thing like this screened door offers. As a material reminder of our own physical relationship to the world, the door simultaneously tells us that we are not alone, that there are others like us. Whenever we experience something like this screened door through our living, feeling, thinking bodies, we're expressing half of a reciprocal condition that involves someone else; when it was built by another's hands, muscles and mind. As such, the door stands as a material expression; the work of that predecessor who gave some part of himself for what is now before us, as door. As a material thing, the screened door is a testament of that person's presence and effort, now reaching out on our behalf today. Through making something like that door there, the body is enlivened twice. First, there was the builder's, whose own eyes saw the maker's making. His hands guided the tools, feeling the work coming together, handling what was being fabricated. He smelled the aromatic sweetness of the pine, the acrid smell of the oak as his saw blade cut smoothly through the wood. His ears heard the solidity of the material as he carefully tapped the thin pieces of the frame together. The builder's whole body experienced the materiality of his making—as he originally brought his handiwork together. That previous experience, in turn, now offers to us, the work standing as testimony after the builder had done his best. Our bodies—like his was earlier—are now inspirited, as we experience the work in our own way. Through the door, we discover not only a great deal about ourselves but, as well, something important about those who caused the work to be in the first place. This effect of the builder's work this way—though anonymous—has a long life, as the work of the door is given

over to others. It's this double activity brought about through the materiality of building that instructs us about our own presence in the world. In their unison of purpose, each complement and propel us forward, as the door moves deeper and deeper into making for us a world.

Through something like this door, we sense ourselves embedded in what we have made. While our own capability shapes what this built thing is, its materiality likewise defines our own being. We come to know ourselves through things like screened doors. It puts us in touch with the way that



we are in the world. By thoughtfully considering things like this screened door, we're reaching out into the world, to experience it in its fullest. Each time we do so, we're considering the human stamp found upon every simple made thing. Reaching outward to build simultaneously turns inward to offer something about ourselves. As sentient material entities who organize, structure, and inform the things that we make, we build because of our desire to feel at home in our world. In seeking our place—in making a location for ourselves—we measure ourselves in accord with those things, obtaining a reference of our own self-standing.

How we build materially, is how we perceive the world. Building connects the body (both the individual physical being and, as well, the collective body of humanity) to consciousness. To be immersed in a built thing means to be immersed in a reflection of our own being. Through our built things, we find not only resemblance, we sense mutual standing. Through a work's self-standing, empathy is discovered. Through sensing the realness of something as mundane as our screened door, we begin to experience how it is that we re-mold the materiality of the world in our likeness, consequently re-making the world like us; not as standing apart but as standing together. Being caught up in built things means being involved in an inquiry about ourselves. Through the materiality of our built things we find a response to the way that we are in that world.

Notes

1. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, edited by Galen A. Johnson, from the essay "Eye & Mind," Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1993, pg. 125.

