

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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The Falcon's Return [Forming Place, Informing Practice]

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*There are peregrine falcons uptown, downtown and midtown.  
They zoom through the canyons of Wall Street and perch  
on the gargoyles of Riverside Church.  
A pair hunts pigeons and blue jays around the  
grounds of the New York Public Library.  
And two chicks recently hatched in a nest on the Brooklyn Bridge.*

New York Times, June 18, 1995

In 1972, the peregrine falcon was one of this country's most endangered species; none were known east of the Mississippi and only a few survived in the west. Pesticides (most notably DDT) in the birds' natural habitats had contaminated their food, causing eggshells to thin and crack, and embryos to die before hatching.

More than two decades ago, wildlife biologists began gathering pairs of birds from the wild and resettling them in urban locations — ledges of high-rise buildings that approximate the birds' natural habitat. The city is a cleaner place for the peregrines to live and breed; urban pigeons, after all, were never contaminated by DDT.

Tall buildings are ideal for peregrines; they fulfill the birds' natural preference for cliffs and mountain peaks. Nesting places have included the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge, Boston's Custom House and the Fisher Building in Detroit. A business executive who would never consider a wilderness expedition might now be treated to the spectacle, right outside her conference room window, of a wild falcon swooping down on a pigeon at 200 miles per hour. At least fifty U.S. cities have participated in the recovery program. In 1991, the peregrine falcon was removed from the endangered list, and by 1993 its population numbered 900 pair.'

If we did not know better, we might think the birds had studied contemporary literature and adapted our metaphors of urban canyon and urban jungle for their own use. But, in fact, their reappropriation of bridge, rooftop and ledge is literal, not metaphorical; it is related to the physical elements of height, distance, airspace and foothold. The falcon perceives a reality from which our metaphors spring. Its unconditional acceptance of an architecture that we now choose to

condemn as inhospitable and unnatural raises interesting questions about the current states of culture, nature and the city.

The Indo-European root of the word *culture* is *kwel*, which means “to revolve” and which also gives us the words *cultivate*, *cult* and *circle*. This etymological reading gives us a fresh sense of the relationship between nature and the contemporary city; outside the linear timeline of history, culture is cyclical and self-perpetuating.

The word *nature* comes from the root *gene*, which means “to give birth” or “to beget”; the root of the words *city* and *civilization* is *kei*, meaning “to lie down.” Though we often imply that culture is nature's opposite, it is, rather, civilization that is defined by the human-to-human relationships that are outside of nature — in other words, within the household, the place of lying down. Into this more self-contained realm we have appropriated and domesticated selected elements from nature, certain animals and plants. Groups of these domestic households form the city, which attempts to hold the forces of nature at bay.

Meanwhile, other aspects of nature have been carefully isolated and cloned as urban commodities. This is a nature that tempers the reality of the wilderness with the safety and status of a four-wheel-drive vehicle, a nature that bottles spring water and makes it available on any city street, a nature that is processed by the capitalist infrastructure of nature companies and green industries. This is a nature no longer in opposition to civilization, but consumed by it.

Ironically, we are outside the nature we have constructed. History reveals to us various types of exile, but until now exile has always been the result of one group or force acting upon another. The unique con-

dition of the late twentieth century is that we who have perpetuated the landscape of exile and we who are exiled are the same.

The loneliness of humans as a species is exemplified in the architecture and planning of American cities; in much of the dystopian fiction of the twentieth century, the phenomenon of alienation is shaped by an urban experience. The city, constructed to protect us from the alienating forces of nature, has now turned on its creator. So thoroughly have we managed to exclude the perceived other — weather, animals, wilderness — so thoroughly have we civilized the city, that we have shut out ourselves as well. This should not be surprising. Why should we assume that we, as products of nature, would be able to thoroughly wean ourselves of its rhythms and textures?

When we speak of nature in the city, we are usually referring to green parks. This urban landscaping is no more natural than urban pets, which are conditioned to sleep on couches, eat supermarket food and wear coats when it rains. Other urban creatures, such as rats, pigeons, raccoons and cockroaches, are loathed for different reasons; all are the subjects of relentless extermination.

Zoos are among our most ironic permutations of nature. In some, like the pioneering San Diego Zoo and the redesigned Bronx Zoo, the recreation of a wilderness appears so vast and complete that the animal can completely lose itself within. Yet who is the winner here? Not the animal, who would surely rather be back in Africa with hundreds of square miles instead of merely acres to roam. Not the spectators, who often complain that even with binoculars they fail to catch a glimpse of the animals.

The same institutions that engender the infrastructure of skyscrapers, parks and zoos also reorganize fluid time into a series of spatial moments that we have come to call history. Within this timeline are acts of building, all in some sense a confrontation with the authority of nature. Yet the authority we now confront in America is that of the megalopolis machine. Here we turn to the lesson of the falcon: the contemporary

city, born of the forces of corporate capitalism, is now our own second nature.

First imagined as transparent objects, modern skyscrapers eventually became just the opposite, reflecting back the city with a force that asserts their static power, their mute resistance to nature. With high-speed elevators, plate-glass windows and absolute climate control, they defy both time and the weather; their weighty mass rejects the earth and all its messiness. Yet these buildings are paradoxically becoming more earthlike; in their very numbers they form a new urban topography of cliffs and canyons that the falcons find so welcoming. Is this landscape really any more inhospitable than the mountains and forests that confronted the first builders with their bulky, stark and homogeneous vastness?

Suppose we were to declare a moratorium on new buildings in the city and to manipulate the fabric that is already woven — that is, to approach the urban landscape as we once approached the natural landscape, as raw material to be taken apart and put together again in a different form.

Penelope unraveled part of her half-completed shroud for Laertes every evening, for to finish it was to succumb to the suitors' demand for marriage and to lose her hope for Odysseus' return. Like making lace from whole cloth by pulling carefully on a few well-chosen threads, urban architecture by subtraction can suspend both the program of permanence and the desire for completion. To unravel and reweave pieces of the city, specifically the taut skins of buildings, is to welcome the texture of uneven edges; to cultivate the steel and glass surfaces of this modern terrain is to take on the metaphor of second nature.

Thus we combat our urban exile, not by leaving the city, but by penetrating its surfaces and operating on them. "To make a field," writes John Berger, "one must enter into it." Such subjectivity assumes that we open ourselves to the speech of the city, that we listen to buildings and roads the way the Aboriginal listens to bushes and rocks. How do we regain such an antediluvian innocence? Who of us will write the urban equiv-

alent of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*? Who will engage the poetic suspension of disbelief that permits a savanna for giraffes under the urban freeway.

Rome is overrun with cats; Venice is sinking; acres of weeds are growing in whole blocks of Detroit, left empty since the riots of 1967 for nature to reclaim. These examples reflect some of the limits of human authority, limits on the degree to which cities can become civilized. They stand in contrast to utopian visions of the perfect city, acknowledging the contingencies of overlap, simultaneity and bricolage, of mess and contradiction.

Like the semantic paradox of the "cozy pub,"<sup>3</sup> uncivilized cities can begin to express the human need for intimacy. It is not so much person-to-person intimacy that our cities now lack, but rather the complex intimacies we once felt with the wilderness forces of animals and the weather, emotions that once engendered our myths and our art: our culture.

History itself has weight, and the unburdening of culture from history is one of the best understood missions of Modernism. Ironically, it is now Modern buildings that weigh the city down. Their weight is the composite result of physical and economic qualities; the first, at least, falls into architecture's realm of concern. Liberated from the freeze-frame linear matrix of history, architecture can cast itself into a mode of thought in which culture lightens the city's burden, in which urban buildings can be transformed from the unequivocal, opaque emblems of postwar capitalism into enigmatic transparencies.

To read the city as second nature is to return culture to the city.

## Notes

1. The peregrine falcon recovery program began through efforts of government and private agencies soon after the ban of DDT in 1972. In that same year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service formed teams of biologists from the public and private sector to collaborate on protection strategies and The Peregrine Fund, a private organization, developed a major propagation facility in Idaho. In 1974, scientists from these organizations joined forces with those of state wildlife agencies and began releasing captive produced young falcons out into the wild. Municipal organizations, such as the Chicago Peregrine Release and Restoration project, would later add their support to the effort.

By 1991, reintroduction of the peregrine had ended in the east, and, in the west, only a few re-introductions are still taking place. In all, as the result of reintroduction efforts, more than 4,000 peregrines have been released to their former habitat.

2. John Berger, "Field," in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

3. "Pub" is short for "public," while "cozy" suggests intimacy.