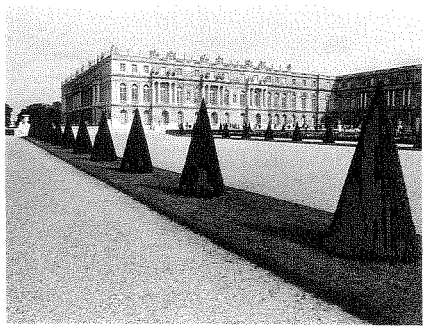
a round about around . . . Buildings . . . a round about around

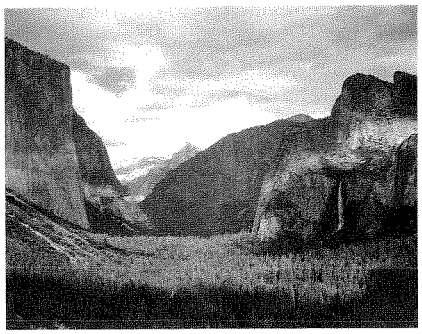
Catherine Howett



A meditative round probably ought to begin with the very words in which the invitation to reflection is expressed, and *around buildings* suggests worlds of meaning right at the start. Look at the way the word *buildings* sits there, smugly assertive, accented on the first syllable like *can*non or *right*eous or *so*lid. And it's got those fine explosive shots to fire—a *b* . . . a *d* . . . a *g*—striking straight through the ear to the mind. *Around* is a weak word, centered on vowels that make the lips form a circle, a void, a pitiful whimpering *ow* to which *buildings* must boldly respond.

Together, the two words seem related to those great dyadic categories by means of which we humans like to order our world, a propensity that undoubtedly began with distinctions observed by Adam and Eve and that still conditions us to make associations between such terms as male/man/mankind/active/positive/mass on the one hand, and female/woman/nature/passive/negative/void on the other. There are myriad subsets, of course, that get assigned to the "appropriate" side—innocent things like day and night, light and dark for the poets; figure and ground for the painters; as well as more portentous dichotomies like rational/intuitive and strong/weak. (My copy of *Roget's Thesaurus* suggests the adjectives *effeminate, feminate, womanish* as synonyms for *weak, feeble, impotent,* and *powerless.*) On this issue, psychologists and semioticians acknowledge the same reality as plumbers describing pipes or electricians, plugs. Or architects, buildings.

Thus the building and the space around it are perceived as polar opposites, just as in the city the aggregate of buildings stands against its "open space." Building and city are virile expressions of culture and civilization, while their surroundings remain identified, however remotely, with the province of Dame Nature. Every act of building recapitulates the primal strategies by which the human animal first contrived to shelter itself from a threatening environment. A building creates its own, new world in which all is ordered to serve and secure human purpose; beyond it extends that other, virtually nameless reality, for which *environment* and *landscape* are terms too broad, *site* and *grounds* too narrow. What is it that one looks out at through the windows, walks out into through the doors? Familiarly we refer to it as the *out-of-doors*—a description rather like "Mrs. Building." The space surrounding buildings most often borrows its identity from the buildings that occupy it.



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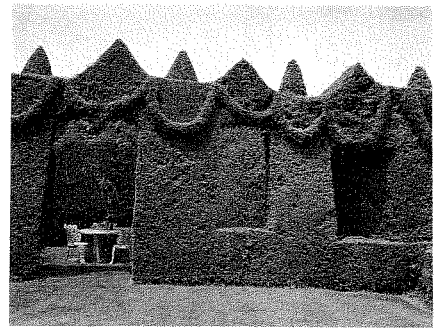
When we project our domain outward from the building, imposing form on a previously amorphous, undeveloped or inappropriately developed surround, the shadow-play of Man in confrontation with Nature is re-enacted. The landscape is transformed through single or multiple acts of will or omission, according to rules and conventions analogous to those that determine building form, and in response to an articulated or at least intuited design program. The nineteenth-century innovation, attributed to Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, of referring to professional designers of landscape as *landscape architects*, rather than by using the traditional but more effete-sounding *landscape gardeners*, represented a deliberate effort to underscore the parity of intellectual rigor and similarity of methodology that the discipline shared with architecture. Olmsted knew that he was doing a great deal more than merely "working with" nature; he was most often, as was the case in the design of New York's Central Park, creating a particular kind of landscape out of whole cloth, carting in mature trees and mountains of soil in order to change an urban wasteland into an image of serene pastoral order. Nature was manipulated and controlled as thoroughly as she ever was at Versailles.

We approach the problem of figuring out what to do with the space around buildings in the same spirit, aiming to produce a good plan, whether for an orchard or a garden, a plaza or a shopping arcade, parking or passage. We aim to make some*thing* out of it, a new world out there in nature that complements the world of the building. In this way, the natural world becomes more habitable and familiar; we celebrate the "humanized" landscape, comfortable in the knowledge that the Forest Service and the National Park Service are taking care of enough wilderness to supply years of Sierra Club calendars. The face of nature that we wish to see has nothing to do with the awesome reality that made a dark cave more inviting than the open plain and inspired the first fences and walls. Weather is practically our only daily reminder that there are aspects of nature still beyond our control, especially on those occasions when she "goes on a rampage" and the worlds we have built for ourselves are suddenly no longer safe from storm and flood, lightning, wind, or tides.

But it is not just the physically threatening power of nature that the architects of the landscape overcome or conceal in creating what are deemed to be more appropriate environments around the buildings in which we live and work. "Original" nature is so infinitely complex that it must often seem to us disordered, random, even chaotic—in a way that has continually challenged us, over the course of history, to simplify, order, and set it right. We *master* nature. So the places we make for ourselves in nature, the out-of-doors places around buildings, strive for a pleasing impression of orderliness; good design comes down to sensitive composition of the spaces and selection of materials, responsive to the needs of the program. We add "amenities" around buildings: places to sit, handsome paving, lights, shrubs and flowers; fountains are especially nice to have. Enlightened cities make the addition of well-designed outdoor environments an important priority, firm in the belief that such places make our lives better, if only economically. We aim, in fact, all of us, for a look in the landscape that suggests solid economic prosperity, and we produce a great many more-or-less clean, more-or-less comfortable, easily comprehensible, but spiritually and emotionally sterile outdoor places.



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Sterile. As soil is that lacks the yeasty mix of chemical nutrients that supports the life of living things. Every trace of the seductive mystery and wonder that is part of our childhood experience of the natural world seems to have been banished from the designed spaces around the buildings that we are forced to inhabit as adults. Why is it only at the edges, just beyond the limits of the world that we're keeping tidy, that the richly layered processes are most clearly revealed—in waste places, derelict lots, marshes and riverfronts (the ones that have not been sanitized and converted to shopping promenades), in patches of woods and untended verges of roadway? Why is it that torn-up places in the city, like a construction site that lays bare the strata of dirt and rock and lifts the pungent smell of earth into the air, exercise a strange allure, quite apart from the excitement of watching the work being done? Why have we never accommodated the experience of mud, of ice, of weedy thickets where birds nest, of engagement with trees and plants in some way other than as ornaments or architectural form-givers? Why must we obliterate from our landscapes any suggestion of death and decay, sweeping away the detritus that is the stuff of regenerating life and growth?

We cannot escape our human need, in designing the small pieces of the world that surround buildings, to filter the vision of what is so much beyond our comprehension through the distorting lenses of our own conceptions and desires. We must inevitably abstract from nature if we are to know her at all, if we are to conceive the forms through which our understanding and reverence and delight are to find expression. If the forms and conventions that we have inherited from the past show signs of having lost their vitality and meaning, that's probably just as well. The world beyond the building is not a void waiting to be filled, or a chaos waiting to be ordered. Designing in nature is not at all like designing a building; the building, in fact, exists in the midst of living nature. Right now, it appears, we find it difficult to handle the world around the building in ways that reflect what our minds know or our souls sense about the way that natural system works. We need to engage in a new conversation, a dialogue with nature through the language of design, creating landscapes that reflect questions rather than routinely imposed answers.

Photographs by Marc Treib

1 Versailles, France
2 Yosemite Valley, California
3 Ladew's Topiary Garden. Monkton, Maryland.