

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Places

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hb305pn>

### Journal

Places, 1(2)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Jackson, John B.

### Publication Date

1983-10-01

Peer reviewed

## John B. Jackson



Twenty years ago, as editor of what was then a very small and very obscure periodical struggling to survive on the subscriptions of some 200 readers, I received a manuscript entitled “Toward Making Places.” The opening sentence read as follows. “The architect’s task is more than the manipulation of materials and the molding of space, it is the definition and possession of place.”

Puzzled but impressed, I read further.

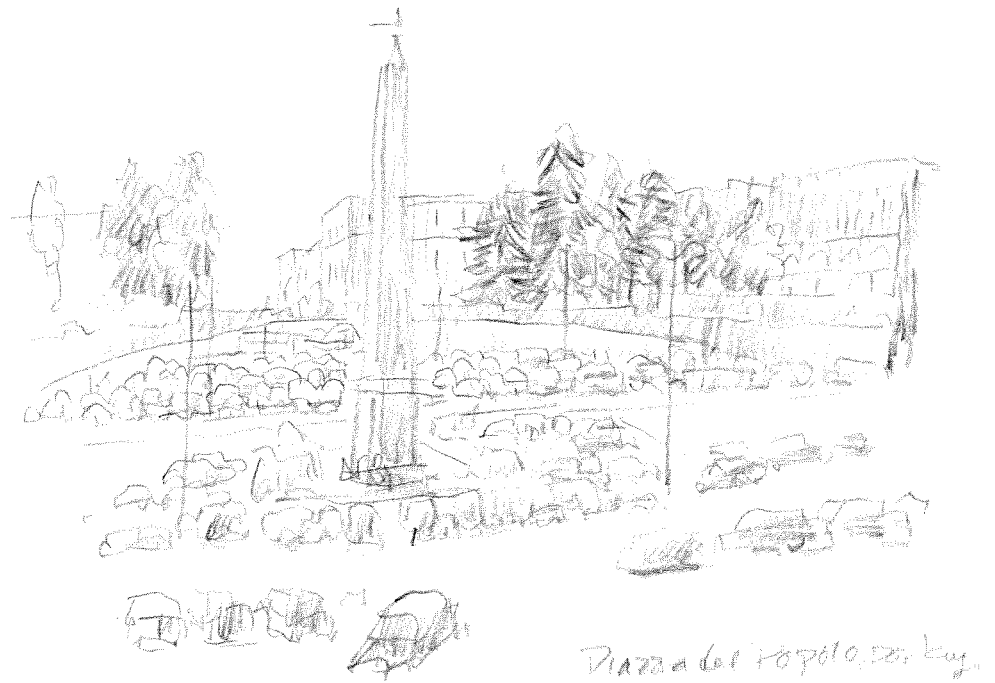
A building is in a specific place to which it must specifically respond. Generalized forms must grow out of a thorough understanding of the particular place, activities, techniques of building and systems of service. We must start not with geometry but with the user. . . . We must be reminded of an order that is not our own; the simple facts of the natural world that nurtured our growth and on which we still depend. . . . The creative act of architecture abstracts intrinsic qualities of an existing natural environment, together with components of our mechanical world, synthesizes a new place, a harmony of human and natural environments.

I had already published not a few articles dealing with the then popular topic of how to reconcile man’s presence with the preservation of the natural environment, and I must say I was not eager to read what I suspected was still another of the familiar

admonitions to architects and planners to design with nature. Those were the years when the environmental movement was more concerned with design than with ecology. But to my surprise I soon saw that this article had a very different tone and point of view. It read more like a manifesto than a warning. It called for our “taking possession” of the environment, not to exploit it but to establish human domains. “The specific solution starts with a place, makes it habitable, and enhances the qualities of the specific place by making it responsive to the needs of the people who use it.”

The underlying theme, repeatedly emphasized, was that “the places that we build should . . . keep us aware of the conjunction between natural order and synthetic form that is the base of human activity.” “We require architecture as distinct from buildings, to create a singular sense of order; a sense of *place*.” But what attracted me most about the article was the importance attached to the notion of specificity of concreteness. It seemed to be saying that there was no such thing as *place* in the abstract. Each one was a unique reality.

The four young authors of the article were then members of the faculty of the Department of Architecture at the University of California at Berkeley; they have since become eminent teachers, writers, and architects. They were Donlyn Lyndon, Charles W. Moore, Patrick J. Quinn, and Sim



van Der Ryn. I am proud to remember that *Landscape* published their first collaborative piece of writing. They were among the earliest, I think, to express the need for including place as an ingredient in every architectural design, and I know that each has written much more on the subject. The intervening 20 years have seen an ever widening interest in the approach—this magazine being the latest and most significant instance—and there is no doubt that the interest will spread throughout the design professions before the decade is over, and be discussed by laymen as well.

It is this prospect of acceptance and popularity (and inevitable misinterpretation) that leads me to believe that one of the first undertakings of the editors of *Places* would be to explain the subject; to specify how it intends to show specificity, and tell us what concreteness is, with concrete examples. And the very word itself calls for interpretation, for I doubt that the initiates always realize that in talking about *place*—in the singular and without a definite article—they are using an ordinary

word in an extraordinary way. No dictionary that I know of mentions this usage. Among the 14 different definitions of the noun “place” listed in the *American Heritage Dictionary*, not one comes close to the word as used (for example) in such a phrase as “sense of place.”

Far from finding this singularity objectionable, I think it indicates that a new spatial concept has evolved. It is simply a question of saying, as clearly as possible, what that concept is. My own response, when I am confronted by an old word being used in what is to me a novel way, is to find out what it originally meant—not in order to return to that meaning, but to learn something about its subsequent evolution. *Place*, I discover, has a complicated past, and its evolution, as I understand it, has been in two separate directions: one toward increasing abstractness, the other toward greater visibility and specificity. In its original Latin form—*platea*—its significance was down-to-earth: it meant a broad street or an open space. It is related to such words as flat, and flag (as in flagstone), and of course to plaza and piazza. This urban usage seems

to have persisted well into the Middle Ages, for *place* often indicated a collection of houses or a town, and even a mansion. By the Renaissance it was used to refer to what we call a square: an orderly arrangement of houses that is not a street, and an eighteenth-century English traveler commented on the “squares, as we improperly call them in England but which the Germans, as well as the French and Italians, more properly denominate Places.”

So the urban connotation lingered over the centuries. But it so happens that there still survives an older English word, this time of Germanic origin, meaning place in the strictly spatial sense, and that word is *stead*. Stead, it is true, has its urban usage—as in the German word *stadt* and in place-names like Hampstead, but words related to it tell us something about a more rural concept of space in the past. We still use in everyday speech such words as homestead and farmstead, and also steady and instead—meaning, of course, in place of—and a remote relative of stead is a now obsolete term for place: stow or stowe, which we still use as a

verb meaning to pack tightly or to “put in place.”

If we had not discarded the old word “stead”—no doubt because it was Anglo-Saxon and countrified—we could now use it and discuss the “sense of stead” or the “making of stead,” and use the word place to indicate *position*. Nevertheless, our forebears decided in favor of place, and since of necessity the newer Latinate word had to take over the meanings of the word it replaced and still retain its own meaning, the result was a word which was at once abstract and specific. The essentially urban and object-oriented concept inherited from the classical world was combined with the older, more rural word emphasizing security. Thus, by the late Middle Ages, *place* had come to mean both the location of an orderly, permanent arrangement of spaces and structures and a social or official position. Putting these two usages together we might say that a specific example of a place would be a *homestead* containing crops and fields and family; *steadfast* in that it was fixed in one spot in the midst of a shifting and unpredictable environment, *steady* in the sense of being regular in operation. The classical contribution provided this place with boundaries, with defined *extent* and *status* in relation to its neighbors. It transformed the homestead into an *estate* or domain.

The word, in short, had achieved a

degree of specificity at least in spatial terms. Even so, place had no landscape or aesthetic identity. It was still little more than the location, the container, of certain social or economic values.

As one might expect, a newer and much more specific definition evolved in the eighteenth century. I scarcely need point out how the romantic movement not only taught us to appreciate the beauties of natural scenery, but how it taught us to seek out the beauty unique to a specific region or place. But more than romanticism was at work revising and expanding our sense of place. We began to value place as a way of expressing ourselves and even of developing our personality. Place was our own individual space. “It is a curious fact,” Peter Collins observes in *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*, “that until the eighteenth century no architectural treatise ever used the word [space]. Moreover, the idea of space as a primary quality of architectural composition was not fully developed until the last few years. What mattered to classical theorists was structure, and this did not necessarily imply the enclosure of space. . . . The change in outlook probably first occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century as a result of the introduction of romantic gardens.” Collins points out that one of the first signs of this personal awareness of space was the popularity of the villa or country residence which, he says, became “a medium for expressing

architecturally many of the most powerful aspirations of the age.”

What, we might ask, were those? Surely domestic privacy was one of them, and status derived from being associated with a handsome place was another, but perhaps the most important aspiration of them all was to receive and be influenced by the spiritual forces of nature. Place, interpreted as a secluded and natural appearing environment, privately owned, acquired the determining role that we now ascribe to environment. Whether place was the villa of the London merchant, the Hudson Valley country place, or the grandiose park of Prince Pükler-Muskau, place became identified with the solitary experience of nature.

The naïve environmentalism that sought to make architecture reflect the influences of place in the use of local materials and in conforming to local landscape characteristics has long since yielded to a more scientific, and more abstract, definition of environment; whereas nineteenth-century thought of the influences of place, particularly “natural” place, as essentially emotional and private, has yielded to a view that those influences can be therapeutic and social as well. If place and the possession of place in the spatial sense can mean so much to the individual and help so much in establishing his or her identity, is there any reason why these benefits should not be available to all? Could we not further elaborate and enrich the concept of space so that

we could actually design and create space-communities “abstracting the intrinsic qualities of any existing natural environment” (to rephrase a passage from “Toward Making Places”), and “together with components of our mechanical world, synthesize a new place, a harmony of human and natural environments?”

As I see it, this is how matters now stand. With increasing urgency and specificity we are asking how socially defined place can be made here in contemporary America, and we are looking systematically in many directions for inspiration and guidance: to those places that already exist and give satisfaction, to those that existed in the past, to individual experiences of place, and above all to those disciplines—environmental, historical, philosophical—that have studied and interpreted man’s ceaseless and rarely successful efforts to feel at home in the world.

I close with an excerpt from an article that appeared in *Landscape* shortly before “Toward Making Places.” It was originally a speech by Dolf Steinberg, professor of political science at Heidelberg, given in 1953, at a time when there was still much homelessness and “enforced mobility” in Central Europe. In 1962 it seemed to offer a way to interpret certain characteristics of the American landscape. Today it suggests the wisdom of taking those characteristics into account in the

creativity of any truly American place.

It is doubtful whether our essential rootlessness, our homelessness in the widest meaning of the word, can ever be overcome, whether in fact rootlessness is not a basic characteristic of man. . . . We do not want to design architectural or planning fantasies for a society of plant-like beings, we do not want to become a deeprooted immobile race, inhabiting a hivelike community or neighborhood. . . . When we take into account that in a spatial topographical sense there are three poles in the habitat: dwelling, work, and society . . . it follows, it seems to me, that the task of producing communication is no less important to the architect and planner than the task of providing shelter and workplace. . . . Whether it is an automobile or motorcycle or bus or subway, whether road or rail, these objects belong no less than do dwelling and workshop or factory to a complete overcoming of the sense of homelessness among men, for they provide the possibility of freedom and movement. For man is *not* a plant and his house is not an organism, and he must be free to move at his will between these three poles which taken together constitute his home.