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Forming Place, Informing Practice

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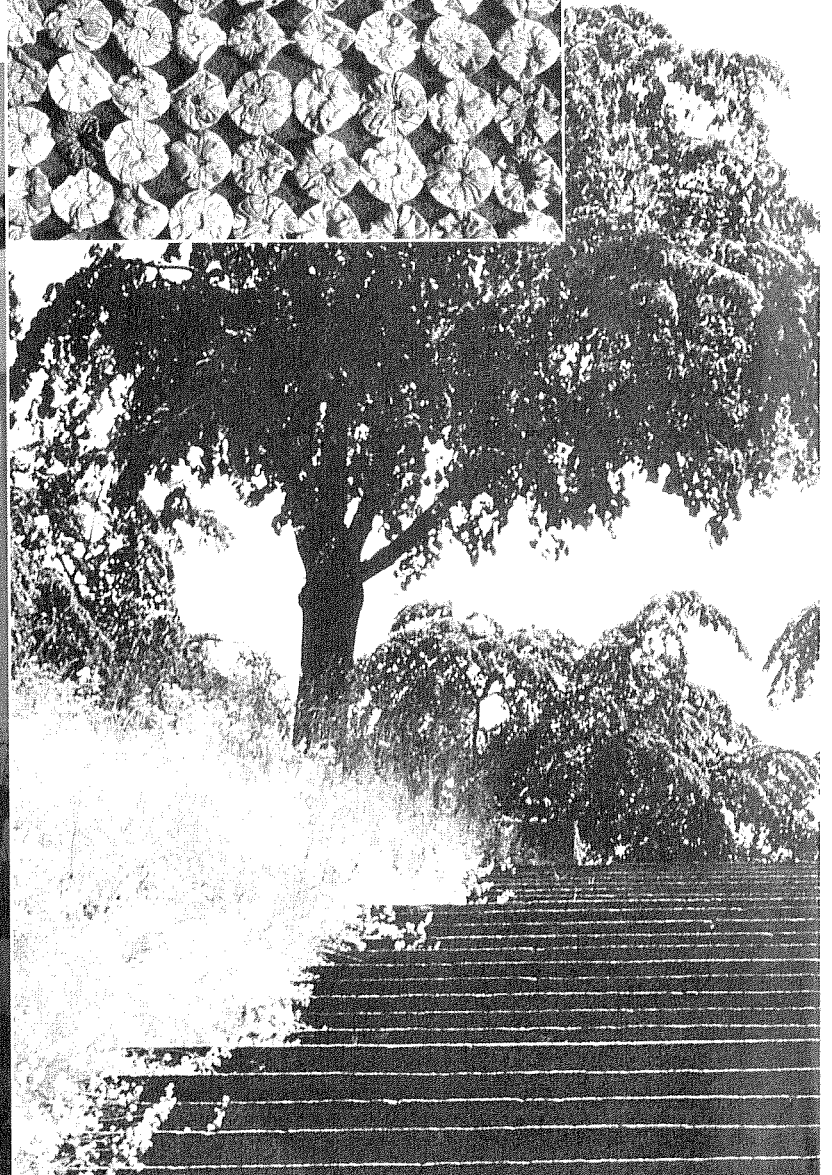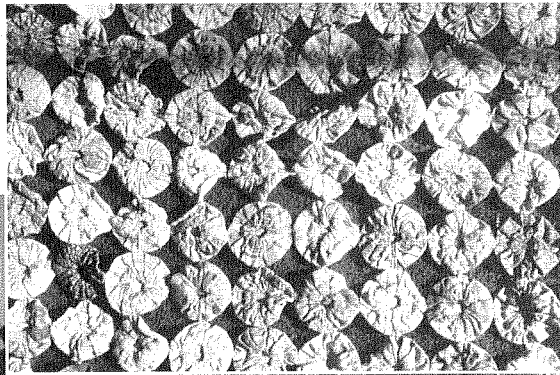
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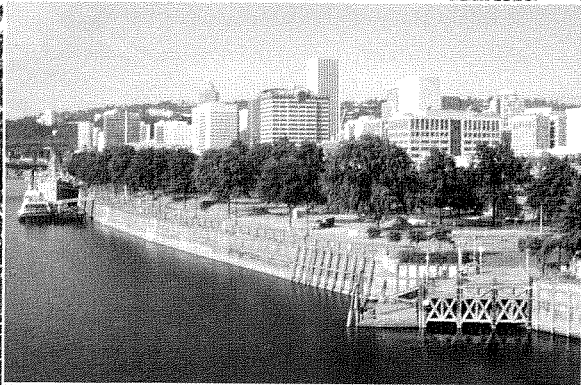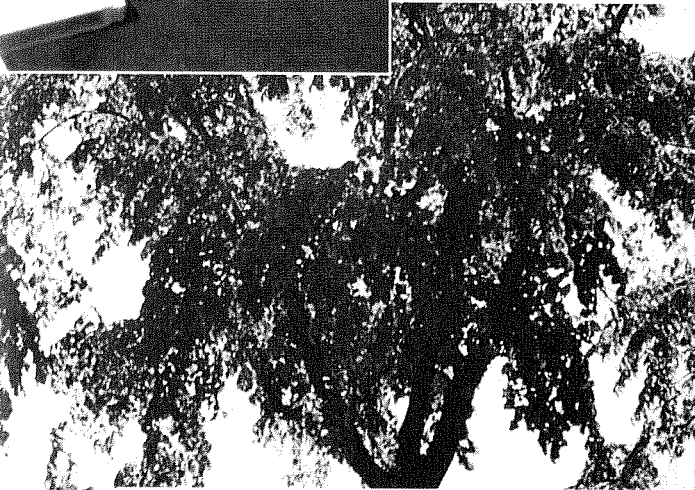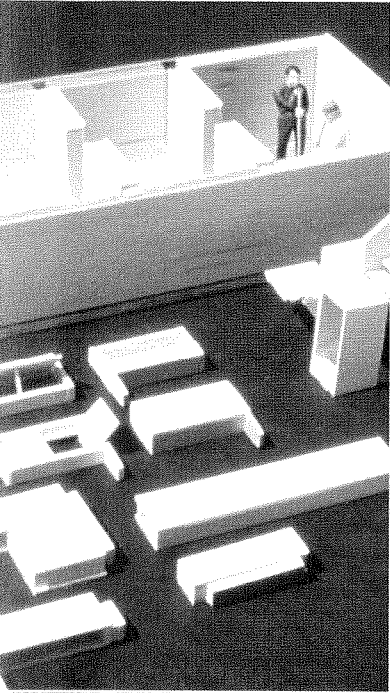
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Forming Place

Informing Practice

Thomas R. Chastain, Guest Editor

Clockwise from opposite page, lower left: **Andres Mignucci Giannoni, Jan Wampler, Jan Wampler, Jan Wampler, René Davids, Franco Mancuso, John Echlin** Background: **William L. Porter**

The word *place* is often used to describe the larger territory in which we build. The boundary of this territory is defined by a sense of being inside — inside a region, a town, a neighborhood. The boundary is identified not by a demarcation of its edge but by the feeling of coherence among the spaces and buildings within it, which gives rise to a competence in the way a place is built and inhabited. We value such places for their qualities as extended environments and the support they give to our inhabitation. We value the feeling of being somewhere as opposed to just anywhere.

Above: **Charleston house type.** Below: **Typical plan of door, porch and side yard.**

Photo, drawings: **Thomas L. Chastain**
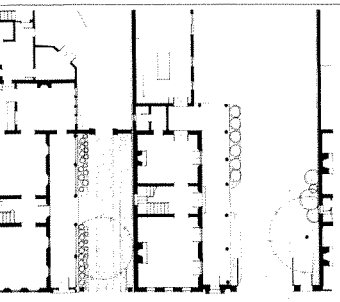
A place also provides the opportunity to participate in a collective expression as we come to know what it means to be part of a larger territory. There is a connectedness, which we often describe as a sense of place, whose meaning and authenticity flow from relationships between a culture, time and locale. We value the distinctiveness of places that emerge out of such circumstances.

The articles that follow are based on an implicit belief that the qualities of these connections can be recognized and that a place can be read.[1] We read a place to inform the way we practice and, in forming places, we produce a further reading. The process of forming – informing constitutes a practice of place — one that produces, holds and represents knowledge about a place.

The practice of place has been diminished by various forces, including a global economy whose flows of information and capital make our desires and institutions more uniform. Rene Dubos, writing twenty-five years ago, pondered this erosion of difference, stating that: "all urban areas in prosperous industrialized countries are of course becoming increasingly alike in their superficial aspects." But he was optimistic, noting that "the subways of New York, Montreal, Toronto, London, Paris and Moscow, all operate according to the same technological principles, but their employees and passengers follow the beat of different drums."[2]

Dubos's notion is that the essence of a place resides not in the physical setting of the place but in the practices of producing and inhabiting it. He also wrote: "because it is rooted both in human and physical nature, environmental diversity will persist within the political ecumenism of One World. Natural and cultural forces will overcome technological and political imperatives and continue to nurture the genius loci which account for persistence of place."[3] The implication is that the shared qualities of that practice are what persist.

Sharing in a Place

While the way we come to know a place may be largely through intuition, our actions express that knowledge concretely. Knowledge is transmitted through the ways in which we work and through the environments we make, and this sharing is the means by which a collective discourse with a place is constructed.

For a design practice, one can describe three forms of knowledge that contribute to this shared discourse with a place. First there is understanding that comes from interacting with the phenomena of a place — what can be seen, touched and sensed. Qualities of a locale's light, climate, and terrain, as well as its existing built environment, are the most direct and inescapable aspects of what is shared in a place.

Second, a discourse with a place is informed by our knowledge of how a place supports the life of a culture — the patterns of use and ways in which environment is inhabited. Third, practices share ways of articulating the knowledge of a place. Concepts like type, pattern and system generalize a place in terms that structure or constrain design actions. They articulate the rules that link instances of a form — a description of a type that not only allows designers to share the knowledge an existing place, but also provides the means to reason about its transformation.

An example of such shared knowledge can be found in Charleston, S.C., and its "Charleston house." The house is organized perpendicular to the street, with the main structure built against a side-lot line and the street line. A porch and a yard run parallel to the house, and a door provides access from the street to the porch, allowing the use of the porch to be tempered by the residents. When open, the door provides visual access into the porch area, extending the public realm; when

closed, it protects the porch from direct public view, extending the private space of the house into the side yard. Since this pattern is ubiquitous, the collective experience it provides allows for competence in the way it is designed and used. The pattern's contribution to Charleston's sense of place depends not only on its repetition but also on the recognition of how it is used.

The discourse constructed through knowledge of the sensation, use and conceptualization of place is often formalized through design codes. The intent of such regulations is to provide coherence in the way a place is developed by constraining design within a set of normative rules. Yet, the persistence of place that Dubos seeks depends on the interaction of design practice with a place, not on the standardization of design responses. A conversation with a place should be open to discoveries that are made through a dialogue between what we find and what we make. What is important is for designers to find ways to share that conversation with other designers, and with the inhabitants of a place.

Reading Places

In the design of traditional environments, the shared knowledge of a place is easily extended because the builders of the place are part of its culture. Traditional builders inherently extend the qualities of a place through direct familiarity with the processes of local production and the ways in which a place is inhabited. These experiences accumulate over time and are systematically ordered in the mind of the maker to provide a basis of acting with competence. This design competence allows for participation with the collective knowledge of the place, since it provides the means for interpretation that leads to variation.[4]

In contemporary practice, however, we can neither depend on this relationship nor take for granted that we are always intimately part of the locale in which we are building. In an essay that follows, John Habraken states that as architects have become professionals, we have become "divorced from the natural affinity we have for places that renders intervention self evident." This distancing implies a lack of familiarity with the places in which we work, and Habraken refers to the process of reading a place as a method of becoming acquainted. The intent of this reading is to locate the act of building within the shared discourse of a place.

What do we mean by reading a place? Reading is a strategy that links place to the practices that form it

and argues for ways of informing the practice of further transformation. In our networked world, a basic competency of design practice ought to be the ability to observe the form and structure of any environment, to connect those observations to the ways that people live, and to make decisions about the form's significance. Two kinds of knowledge are revealed by reading: the first is descriptive, ranging from the abstracted to the particulars; the other is transformational, knowing how to move from abstract to particular and vice versa.

Several of the articles that follow explore various modes of reading and the implications of description for shared practice. In his reading of Portland, John Echlin describes the components that contribute to the unique and shared understanding of that city. Jill Stoner writes of recognizing a formal autonomy in the emergence of new patterns of habitation as nature repossesses the city — observations that lead her to propose new patterns of building. Renee Chow describes a shared structuring of detached houses revealed by carefully reading individual practices of habitation. Through her reading, the problem of suburban dwelling design is reconsidered as one that visualizes patterns of use as part of a continuous built-unbuilt field.

A position on the transformational knowledge produced by reading has been articulated by ILAUD (the International Laboratory for Architecture and Urban Design) over the last twenty years. The work of ILAUD can be characterized as a research whose products include both an understanding of the underlying structure of places as well as designs.

A primary method employed by ILAUD is that of reading through the act of design. Giancarlo De Carlo has described this method as:

the means of identifying the signs of physical space, drawing them out of their stratified layers, ordering them and recomposing them in systems that are relevant to the present. In the course of this process it is essential to "understand" but also to imagine by formulating plausible hypotheses, and this means designing. So one could say that "reading" can only be carried out by a mind that also designs.[5]

The mind that designs is a critical one — one that searches for significance in observations through projection. Rather than claim, as De Carlo does, that reading is the exclusive domain of a designer, it would be more precise to say that reading can have embedded within it a design argument — "plausible hypotheses"
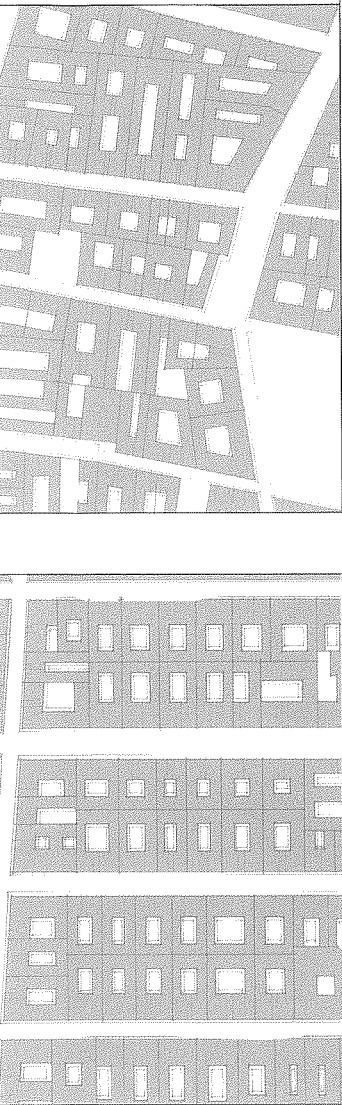
Top: **District VII neighbor-hood fabric**

Above: **District VI neighbor-hood fabric**

that structure our engagement with a place. A hypothesis as a design argument focuses our attention, allows us to make claims of significance, and helps in evaluating how a place could be changed through design.

William L. Porter, writing in this issue, describes such an iterative engagement with a place in which reading leads to the construction of our knowledge of a place, knowledge that then reframes the inquiry of the design. The dynamic nature of reading and knowledge of place can also be seen in Franco Mancuso's work in Venice. His is an experience of discovering a place through a process of reading, designing and re-reading the place as layers of decisions and building are revealed. For Andrés Mignucci Giannoni, the hypothesis concerns light and shadow in Puerto Rico as a collective phenomenon whose properties and meanings are accumulated in building experience, thereby producing further readings.

Reading also includes an awareness of the knowledge and values that we bring with us. Habraken argues that as architecture is a network profession, designers and systems travel, conveying their discipline to various locales. As professionals we bring our disciplinary knowledge to problems and contexts, knowledge that includes our understanding of types and patterns that are found in many places. Rene Davids's article about his use of a range of types — some indigenous, some not — in the design of Southern California housing demonstrates this reasoning. His process shows that not all knowledge is local and, further, that the accumulated concepts and experiences that we carry with us direct our reasoning about a place.

Tale of Two Fabrics

Reading is not a simple transcription, it is dynamic; with each design action something new is learned about a place. An example of two fabrics in Budapest demonstrates the problems of reading a place too simply.

The inner neighbors of Budapest surrounding the old city of Pest, are comprised of Districts VI, VII, VIII, and IX. These neighborhoods, which are organized concentrically around the core of the old city, were developed in the nineteenth century. They share a common building type, an apartment building organized around a courtyard, through which access to apartments is provided. In plan, the dimension between the courtyard and the street edge is consistently twelve meters, with the remaining zones around the courtyard ranging from six to nine meters.

Comparing Districts VII and VI is particularly insightful when looking at how a practice extends knowledge gained from working in a place. The development of District VII began around 1840. Its urban structure, the street and subdivision pattern, is based on an access system that was established so farmers could tend agricultural lots. The subsequent subdivision of the land into building lots was influenced by this irregular form.

The relationship between the urban structure and the building type produced a variety of buildings and spaces. Today one can find courtyards that vary in range from nine to twenty-four meters wide and accommodate a diverse range of uses, including play areas, gardens, stores, work spaces and even auto repair. The organization of buildings is equally diverse, with some having linked courtyards (a few clusters are even three courtyards deep). Thus the neighborhood has a capacity for supporting many different uses while benefiting from the coherence lent by a type, which is expressed in a range of configurations while maintaining a consistent association between the public, collective and private spaces of the neighborhood. This is a place where one can observe a competence in the way a rich texture of spaces supports a culture.

The development of District VI began about 1860, twenty years later, and the area grew more quickly. The urban structure was organized in a more regularized grid with rectangular blocks. The resulting subdivision of these blocks into lots was also more uniform. The builders, extending the experience they gained in District VII, used the same building type, but the resulting structures are organized in a much more repetitive and template-like way; courtyard dimensions, for example, are similar. The buildings demonstrate far less variation and less capacity to take on a range of uses; the place appears less robust and vital, as the use is primarily dwelling.

A significant factor in the uniformity of the District's VI fabric is its regular urban structure. But we can also speculate, from looking at the both fabrics, that while the builders of District VI formalized their experience of the type they observed in District VII, their practice exhibited a more limited knowledge of the type than the builders of District VII did.

The building of District VII demonstrates a great deal of learning about the type. This knowledge includes

the potential of that type to generate different configurations and of the type's potential to accommodate use. The template-like replication of the type in District VI shows little understanding how the qualities of the type generate an architecture. If we were to extend the sense of place found in District VII today, we would want a much richer and fuller understanding of the fabric embedded in our design practice.

Extending Learning

As we are often travelers to the places in which we design, learning about the locale has become an increasingly critical process for us. But the knowledge that is required for us to extend a particular place involves information about its making and habitation, rather than its image. Extracting the layers of a place and recomposing them into relevant systems, through the process of reading, helps us describe this knowledge. The task is to extend these systems to generate new places, something that is learned through designing. Places then, with their layers of making, act as a collective memory that conserve the learning that occurs through design practice.

Jan Wampler's work in India and Pakistan, which he reports on in this issue, is an example of sustaining culture as places develop. He describes an architecture that emerges from the local rules that are extended to generate new buildings. Key to the process Wampler describes is the discourse that is produced through the application of these rules in the design of buildings. What emerges are what Wampler calls "buildings that teach" about local processes of building and habitation.

A practice of place must both induce the sharing of knowledge and extend the learning that occurs through the process of design. This first requires that we formalize what we discover about a place and articulate that knowledge as a set of general principles that give rise to a particular design expression. Such descriptions would strive to put in the hands of practitioners the material of the place — not as images, but as systems from which to generate form. The sharing is of means, not ends.

To extend learning, these discoveries cannot be static, they must be open to the discourse between design practice and the place. Designers, along with revealing what they know through a particular design, must also be able to argue for the systematic transformation of a place — articulating why and how a place can change.

(This might conflict with efforts that seek the persistence of place in the preservation of its image — efforts that we may turn to because we are better at describing what is there than what we have learned.) While reading provides an approach to such a practice of place, to extend and share this learning, we need to make it a collective enterprise.

Today, with increased flows of information, traveling expertise and globalized, uniform markets, it is difficult to maintain hold of concrete, authentic and culturally bound places. We need to develop positions like reading to help direct our intervention in what is often unshared territory. Designers must help sustain the discourse within a place and help make more explicit the knowledge revealed through design.

While traditional environments benefit from the collective experience of their builders, practitioners today face a different challenge. A design practice must find ways of more directly constructing the collective memory of a place, in that the prospects for the persistence of place are tied not to the preservation of a physical locale, but with the conservation of its knowledge within our practice.

Notes

1. The articles are based on papers presented at the symposium Forming Place — Informing Practice, hosted 13-14 March, 1998, by the Department of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, and co-sponsored by the International Laboratory for Architecture and Urban Design.

2. Rene Dubos, *A God Within* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 133.

3. *Ibid.*, 134.

4. Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975) Glassie offers a detail description of knowledge found within a traditional architectural competence. Particularly helpful in this discussion is Section IV: The Architectural Competence (pp. 19-40) and Section VI: The Mechanics of Structural Innovation (pp. 66–113).

5. Giancarlo De Carlo, "The Island of S. Elena," in *Territory and Identity 1 — International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design* (Milan: Maggioli Editore, 1998).