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## Places

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# Placetelling

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The EDRA/*Places* Awards have at their heart the creation and experience of good places. The 2006 awards jury was held at Washington State University's Interdisciplinary Design Institute, located in Spokane, Washington—just such a good place.

Spokane is an amazing mid-size city whose renaissance aim is to live up to its slogan “near nature; near perfect.” However, like many other cities of the American West, its story is one about a *genius loci* of place that is bountiful, but where human settlement has often operated to extract rather than sustain.

The story of Spokane is an apt prelude to some general reflections about the awards program, which were conveyed to students of the Interdisciplinary Design Institute at a plenary session held following the judging of the entries.

## Spokane, Washington: A Placetelling

The site of Spokane was initially that of a Native American trading post. It occupied a place on the Spokane River where Spokane Falls provided a plentiful supply of salmon.

The first permanent European settler there was James Glover. He came west via the Oregon Trail, and like so many other trailblazers, he simply had a dream. When he bought the land that would become downtown Spokane from squatters in 1873, he believed the natural beauty of the Spokane river valley and the timber and mining resources from the nearby Selkirk Mountains was a true gift that would provide the basis for a vital and prosperous new city.

At first Glover was wrong. After four years, the population had grown to only twenty people. But when the railroad came in 1881, Spokane's population swelled quickly to 21,000 by 1889, with residences and businesses built as fast as possible.

As with many American cities in the late 1800s, Spokane's initial rapid growth was cut short by a great fire. But rather than slipping into despair after this 1889 calamity, Spokane ambitiously planned an Industrial Exposition in 1890 to illustrate the confidence of its citizenry.

The following thirty years bore out this faith in the future. The year 1893 brought electric streetcars, leading by the 1910s to one of the most extensive systems in the country. Through the 1890s and early 1900s great investments were made in city parks that expressed the love of the citizenry for nature. By 1910, powered by cheap, plentiful hydroelectric power from the river, Spokane had a population of 104,000, and was a center for trade and commerce.

Unfortunately, the river also became the city's sewer; and to this day the Spokane River remains a significantly polluted waterway. Also, as was the case in many other cities during the mid-twentieth century, outside interests convinced Spokane to replace its trolley lines, powered

**Left:** Spokane's connection to its river was once severed by a series of railroad tracks that created a “great wall.”

**Right:** Relocation of the train tracks allowed creation of a river park. All that remains is the campanile. Photos courtesy of author.







by local electricity, with autobuses, reliant on petroleum brought in from outside.

Pride of place was also sacrificed to a regional transportation infrastructure. For decades the railroads remodeled, crisscrossed and polluted the Spokane River with a double-deck of graded trackbeds known as “the great wall of Spokane.” The Interstate Highway system followed in the mid-1960s, tearing a swath through downtown and destroying the Olmsted brother’s Liberty Park, the jewel of the city’s beloved park system.

Construction of I-90 also facilitated the hemorrhage of commerce from downtown. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, as the city turned its back on the river, literally and figuratively, Spokane stagnated. In its first forty years, through 1920, Spokane grew to 162,000 people. But its population had only reached 170,000 by 1970.

The railroads and the Interstate had remade Spokane into the inconsequential inner working of a regional machine, severing the city’s original connection with its natural setting. However, in the 1970s city residents worked hard to relocate five rail lines from downtown and reclaim the banks of the river. This became the site for the 1974 World’s Exposition, which they gave an ecological focus. After the Expo, the land became the 100-acre Riverfront Park.

By embracing the river this park allows it to again be seen as the Native Americans and James Glover had seen it, as a gift. And the past couple of decades have built on this view. They have emphasized river clean-up, attempts to return the wildlife to the waterway, development of the Centennial Trail (a bike/pedestrian way which runs along the river), and the envisioning of the last piece of the Olmsted brothers’ vision for Spokane, the Great River Gorge Park.

Architecturally, the downtown has also had a renaissance over the past six years, and great effort has been expended on rehabilitation of the early-twentieth-century housing stock.

Spokane’s best times have happened when its citizens have cherished the river and its bountiful natural setting. Its worst times have come when it has turned its back on the river, believing that technological contraptions, whether they are the railroad or the automobile, afford greater freedom and convenience than the river in its own backyard.

This approach provides only an illusion of freedom. It has made Spokane dependent on the state and federal governments and multinational corporations for the supply of services and infrastructure. And, in deeper terms, it embodies a “taking,” robbing the local *genius loci* and

leaving the city and its residents unwealthy and unhealthy.

However, that was mid- and late-twentieth-century Spokane: stagnant and depressed. The story of Spokane has now turned a page, bringing a new bountifulness in recent decades. One can only imagine the further development of the story once the next page is turned.

### Placetelling Elements

I tell this story not only to create a sense of understanding of Spokane, but also to illustrate that what makes places are their ever-unfolding qualities.

Donlyn Lyndon has elegantly defined place as “a space that can be remembered.”<sup>1</sup> *How* we remember is through stories. In *The Literary Mind*, Mark Turner wrote: “Narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought....It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining....Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as stories.”<sup>2</sup>

This connection between place and story became apparent during the jury process of the 2006 EDRA/*Places* Awards. It was clear that an important but implicit criterion in the jury deliberation was the quality of the story being told. What makes a project compelling? Moving? Memorable? Why does it involve a place that people should know and care about?

Through the discussion of the eventual winners at a plenary panel with the jurors in front of students the Monday morning following the jury weekend, several themes of good place storytelling became recurrent: backstory, a context in conflict, a resolution rooted in archetypal experience.

*Backstory.* Without question, each award winner compellingly presented a backstory presenting what had happened previously to create the need for inquiry, whether through design investigation or a more formal program of research.

The Sense of Place project of the University of Calgary Urban Lab developed a good backstory describing the changing nature of the Province of Alberta as it cel-

**Opposite:** Typical of Spokane’s self-rediscovery has been the renovation of a prominent industrial facility that once provided steam heat to most major downtown buildings. Steam Plant Square won the 2001 National Preservation Honor Award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the 2001 Award of Merit from the American Institute of Architects, Pacific and Northwest Region. Its dramatic Steam Plant Grill, shown here, includes the reuse of furnaces, boilers, and towering smokestacks as meeting and dining areas. Photo courtesy of Ron Wells & Company.

ebred its centennial. The set of initiatives undertaken by this project collectively create a gripping history of the ever-changing cultural landscape that is Alberta—from Canada’s frontier, to Canada’s breadbasket, to its diversity of landscapes from natural to rural to urban today. Such a backstory makes clear that the views one has of a landscape reflect not only one’s worldviews, but also shape one’s sense of place—and in so doing, one’s sense of self.

Places for People 2004 illustrated a much more common approach to setting backstory in environmental design research. It is a follow-up to a design proposal by Gehl and Associates for the city of Melbourne that set ten-year benchmarks. The present study revisits those goals and initiatives.

*Context in Conflict.* What spurs a person to action is recognizing a conflicting situation demanding resolution. As such, a value determination is being made, for it is a person’s values that shapes the lens through which they assess each experience.

The Buckeye Village Community Center entry by the Ohio State University’s Kay Bea Jones presented the design for a community center that provides childcare facilities and social and academic gathering areas for single-parent, low-income graduate students. It is located on a site where post-World War II, Ohio State had built housing for the families of veterans returning to college via the GI bill. Fifty years later, the university viewed its usefulness as having been drained away, and the property better seen as an asset to leverage into commercial development. Yet the meaningful content of the site’s history reflects its character is one to support access to higher education for nontraditional student populations. The design intervention became compelling by seizing this site’s marrow and resolving the external conflicts which were obscuring this fundamental nature of the site.

Similarly, the Habitat Trails project attempts to navigate the treacherous terrain of affordable housing, environmental sustainability, and vernacular architecture, yielding a rich solution with numerous creative permutations possible.

*Archetypal Experience.* The jury discussion also made clear that in each case, the place narrative somehow made a visceral connection with its readers. The Paleo Project in Fossil, Oregon, describes a project that yes, is a learning center, but is truly about a small, socially and economically depressed town yearning to enhance its self-esteem through a sense of place identity. This project embraces the uniqueness of the site’s character, involving precious

fossil beds that nature left them. In so doing, it allows the citizens of Fossil to embrace their uniquely bestowed as essential to their place identity.

*Compassion in Architecture*, by Stephen Verderber, is a book that argues that the neglect in providing community-based healthcare in the poorer communities of Louisiana has had and would continue to have devastating impacts on those in society who are on the precipice of disaster. Given that this book was completed one month prior to Hurricane Katrina, it firmly evoked the sense of tragic irony within the jurors.

## Coda

These three elements—backstory, context in conflict, and archetypal experience—together help make each of these projects imageable, visceral and therefore memorable. If place is indeed a “space that can be remembered,” a place must speak profoundly about the human condition. Herein lies the importance of good research in placemaking: to understand the situation so well as to accurately and emotively identify its core essence.

The 2006 EDRA/*Places* award winners go beyond that high calling however, by doing so both reverently and poetically. Together with previous EDRA/*Places* Awards winners, they serve as exemplars of what may be termed “placetelling.” The evidenced respect for the cultural landscape, the people who enliven it, and the meaningful content that connect the two may be what sets this awards program apart from any other. Perhaps these qualities distinguish a good place from just a place.

As for Spokane? Its next chapter has yet to be written, but I hope those who will collaborate in shaping its future will have the sensibilities of the award-winning designers and researchers discussed here, making it, in Ray Oldenburg’s words, a “great, good place.”<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

1. Donlyn Lyndon, as cited in Barton Phelps, “Serial Colonizations, Succession Landscapes, and the California Problem,” *Places*, Volume 17, Number 3 (Fall 2005), p.74.
2. Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 4-5.
3. The term comes from Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).