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Caring About Places: Shifting Focus

In the eyes of many design professionals, criticism follows, treading in the footsteps of creative pioneers. Yet the critic may also lead, directing attention to aspects of a work not otherwise noted (perhaps not even intended) and setting out an agenda of concerns that challenges our conventional assumptions.

To view critically is to consider a work outside the terms of its own production and within a context determined by the way it enters into a larger realm: into a collection of works with which it might be compared or into a specific place or into the lives of people who inhabit that place. The act of criticism shifts focus from the difficult task of making to the urgent task of assessing consequences.

The critique of Cranbrook in this issue initiates a series of articles that will review various means for criticizing places. These are intended to dig beneath the anecdotal personal response and the doctrinaire critique of buildings in order to find ways of considering places that will render new information, that may lead us to make and to demand better places for ourselves and for others.

To see in one place how another might be is perhaps the designer's greatest gift. The drawings of Whiteface swimming hole, which form our portfolio of place representations for this issue, show how provocatively the mind may range from cherished memories to urban design attributes; collecting possibilities for gathering,

seclusion, variable enclosure, episodic flow, and solidity of reference from a few rocks in a streambed carefully attended to, intensely in focus.

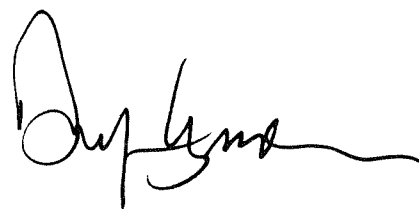
Patrons, too, may shift the focus of professional attention. The Wiesner Building at MIT results from a deliberate attempt to establish a condition in which the balance between architecture and art would be unsettled. In it, interest shifts from the space to a delicate balance of colors in the wall, from sculpted form to usable seat (and back again), from garden to context, from artifact to relationship.

Shifting focus is the business, quite literally, of photographers, who frame our attention with their work, and make decisions about what will be precise and what will be soft in our view. Travel photographs, considered as a genre, indicate how varied the photographic outlook on the world may be and how potent it can be to involve the context of viewing within the photograph itself.

The circumstances of a place may also be thrown into new light by a change in political perspective. In Burlington, Vermont, the election of a Socialist mayor has shifted priorities for development and altered, in some measure, the town's view of itself. In Venice the tall walls and narrow passages of the place called "ghetto" become visible emblems of a process of sequestering that has been the most destructive political force of our time. Like prejudice itself, the forms of the ghetto slip almost

imperceptibly into the fabric of the city; oppression is masked by familiarity until it is thrust into our view.

Shifting focus can be an idle game or it can be profoundly suggestive. It matters most how much we care and how often we look.



Donlyn Lyndon