Radiant Lessons from the Failed Landscape of Desire

Joseph Grange

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid
plain behind me

T. S. Eliot
“The Waste Land”

These thoughts were
occasioned by participation
in a symposium on
phenomenology and the
environment.1 Some time
later, I realized that
metaphysical issues were
at stake, and not mere matters
of design, functional niceties,
and efficiency. We were
concretely involved in
creating a theory of reality
for the contemporary
person. What is more, the
vision of the real that dimly
emerged had ancient roots
and our discussion was, in
effect, a retrieval of a long
forgotten tradition.

The tradition of which I
speak has been obscured by
the positivism and scientism
of the present age and
arrogantly cast onto the
metaphysical junk pile.2
Among the adherents of this
tradition are the greatest
thinkers in the history of
Western philosophy: Plato,
Aristotle, Spinoza, and
Hegel. Its essential principle
may be stated thus:

The whole is more than the
sum of its parts. This simple
thought, elegant in its
simplicity, is a fertile ground
for discourse about
relationships between
the person, society, and
the environment. It tells us that
wholes and parts and their
interrelations constitute the
central core of reality. Also it
brings to the fore the
question of identity and
difference and the issue of
time as passage and time as
completion. In short, the
grand themes of metaphysics
are not universal abstrac-
tions, but rather gain
concrete expression
whenever questions of
environmental life and
quality are seriously raised.

To illustrate this, let me
review succinctly the major
themes of the conference to
draw out the underlying
metaphysical principles.

The symposium began with
a discussion of the open
spaces which establish
boundaries around homes.
Through a phenomenology
of yards, it was established
that movement is an essential
ingredient in these areas
of openness. Furthermore,
such movement is made
intelligible by three phases of
human environmental
interaction. First, every open
space has to have a definitive
threshold whereby one can
sense, albeit dimly, the
passage from one zone of
the open to another. This
discrimination is brought
about by the body sensing
the difference in various
areas about the home (for
example, the hedge that
borders the front door that
opens and the back door
that leads out.) Second, what
makes this sense of difference
concrete in the identity
granted each region by the
bounded quality of its spatial
zone. Thus, to be a this and
not a that is of essential
importance in establishing
an intelligible flow of
movement throughout a
home and its surrounding
spaces. Sherr, homogeneous
space results in undiffer-
entiated sameness. Third,
the defining power of borders
allows the participant to
enter by action or by vision
modes of living space that
demand appropriate
responses.

All this tells us that when
boundaries fail, dwelling is
endangered. A complex
ensemble of different spaces
is required to anchor the
identity of the human in the
real world. This means that
the act of dwelling in a
human way always entails an
extended unity of personal
house, body, and yard. In
fact, without such distinct
regions, the emergence of
community becomes
impossible. For without the
edging of the private into
the public (as occurs when
neighbors gossip over
backyard fences) the
maintenance of the tension
between autonomy and
shared values is impossible.
Free speech requires
backyards.

The metaphysical
dimensions of this
phenomenology of yards
require further elaboration.
The relation between
framing and definitions is
being pointed out. To be
a real particular this is to
be different from a real
particular that. Thus iden-
tity is achieved through
difference, not in spite of it.3
The acknowledgment of
the other is essential for the
creation of the individual.
The framing brought about
by the centripetal zones of
domestic outdoor space
allows identity to be grasped
through the admission of
the other into the region.
of place. Also this place of human dwelling is a meaningful whole by reason of the relations of its parts. Action, understood as movement with intent, flows through these separate spaces and binds them into a unity that is more than the sum of its parts. Whenever a human being truly dwells, he sets up a region of meaning that is charged with different levels of sensibility. A healthy environment allows the person to move through different spaces, sense their qualitative differences, and grasp a unifying pattern. Without such patterns, the human being sickens and dies.

We see, then, that identity through difference is the first outcome of the principle that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Nothing reveals this metaphysical principle more concretely than the way in which the yard brings together into a unity the difference between built space and natural space—the coincidence of these opposites gives birth to the meaning of human place.

To be human involves being-in-place, for place is the region within which a cleaving for meaning is marked out. This understanding of the rock-bottom importance of meaning for human dwelling is forgotten by all those schools of "rational" architecture that, under the guise of modernism, have evolved in corporate America. Order, neutral space, and so-called clean lines are anathema to the authentic metaphysical mind. We need the sharp contrast that comes from distinct difference: The human person as dweller will cultivate the whole that is inchoate in different parts.

"Being" and "logos" have a quaint sound to the modern ear; at best, they strike us as learned and arcane. But from the perspective so far developed, they take on new force. Being is not an empty word but the meaning granted by a place. Logos is not meaningless Greek but the very way in which a place shows forth its meaning. Thus, place gathers being through its logos, and the human body grasps this logos through its own felt understanding of place. But for our somatic intelligence to begin to work, an initial contrast must be imposed upon its functioning. This inauguration of place is made possible through the identity of difference—the shock of contrast that is felt with intensity. Meaning emerges by contrast and so place is the ground of identity won through affirmed difference. We can only affirm what we sense to be different. Effective architecture engraves difference on our consciousness and, at the same time, permits the dweller to create identity through such difference. It compels us to assemble a sense of place.

The sterility of behavioral analysis of lived space—its unending insistence on the flat dimension of stimulus and response—results from this neglect of the realm of meaning. It is human to clear a place for meaning in our lives.

The symposium continued with a presentation of the teaching of architectural design. Students were required to interact with their clients, to discuss the lived meaning of the environment as they experienced it. Patient watching and analysis in the context of the project replace the withdrawal of the architect into his private studio.

The rationale for this insistence on intimate, painstaking analysis of the site is the understanding of architecture as the expression of symbolic intention through material form. The qualitative, felt, and meaningful totality of human perception is stressed rather than its quantity. The notion of design as problem-solving with an emphasis on functional technology is emphatically rejected. Instead, design was seen as evocative and revelatory of what is already there, the established matrix of meaning that constitutes the lived pattern of the neighborhood. Old buildings, bearing the weight of neighborhood history, worn with the tread of many generations, could very well be the hub of a neighborhood's social well-being. Replacing these
buildings with shiny new design modules creates discontinuity and a sense of dislocation, for the vernacular architecture of a place often carries with it an irreplaceable sense of the past.

The spiritual arises from the physical. This axiom demands that all design be grounded in the spirit of a place and its invocation. In terms of our basic metaphysical principle, we can say that totality arises from the particularity of place. The whole, in other words, is felt through its parts, for the universal is enshrined in the finite and mirrors itself in all particulars. Real places for real human beings are interactive, not passive. Once again, the theme of logos arises: Phenomenological design lets be the being of a place in all its fullness.

Education in terms of design requires an effort to let the body (not the rational mind) of the planner remember its place. The body has its own laws. A prereflective affinity with the world. This means that the flesh has its own mind, a way of knowing that the incarnate person experiences in his living through an environment. Planners tend to forget this dimension of human experience. In attempting to remember this fact, the design student ought to be caught up in the web of interrelations that constitute the reality of any concrete place. This pattern of interconnectedness forms a whole that is more than the sum of its parts, and the ground of this felt whole is the human body rooting itself historically, socially, and ethically in the environment.

By way of a pedagogical reminder, we can lay down the following table of metaphysical connections:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>There is no Being without Place</th>
<th>for there is no</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>consciousness</td>
<td>no place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without place</td>
<td>no history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no speech</td>
<td>no language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without place</td>
<td>no action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To teach design is to evoke the power of a particular place. That power is anchored in the whole that speaks through its particular parts.

The final presentation began with these words: “For the first time in history, all has become a technical possibility rather than [just] a spiritual reality.” The theme was Architecture and the Sacred; it can serve both as a beginning and a completion of these metaphysical reflections. The drive behind our industrialized society is the manufacture of desire. Congealed in objects and made into a fetish, this alienation of the self from its own proper concerns creates a social world dependent upon self-estrangement for its survival. Furthermore, this ultimate irrationality is turned into a highly concentrated form of rationality through planning, marketing, and consumerism. It throws up alongside its risks towards gratification a suitable architecture—one that reflects the interchangeable quality of desires; that is to say, a built environment that is always and everywhere the same.

To be driven towards what is not in our best interest seems the very definition of evil. Seeking completion, we desire what shatters our integration as persons. Desire is not the problem. Since we are finite we never become self-sufficient. Desire is the sign of our humanity. What matters most are the objects offered for the satisfaction of our desires. Their prifial quality suggests the growing decadence of our culture. However, life has its own laws and despite our dissatisfaction, we continue to experience an unsatisfiable urge towards wholeness. Due to the quantification of existence, however, our culture identifies being with having. The resultant addition never really adds up because there is always an additional “more” to be had. Failing to understand that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, we go on recklessly.
adding more and more and end up with only parts and more parts. These parts, at best, tend to be concentrations of weight and power used to influence our society towards "better" things; at worst, they signal only the viciously intense presence of greed.

This bleak landscape of failed desire can be changed by "recollecting the Sacred." What is the Sacred? It is the Whole that expresses itself through the insistent particularity of its parts. Such a whole does not yield itself to quantitative analysis. The "how much?" asks the wrong question. To interrogate the Sacred means to ask after the quality, value, and meaning of the particular. This is what Tennyson intended by his "eternity in a grain of sand." It is also what Zen sees in the commonplace and the ordinary.

From this perspective the importance of phenomenology with its insistence upon "a return to things themselves" is made clear. Environmental understanding and its application to design must back away from our contemporary condition of high abstraction. The extreme of quantitative and reductionist planning needs radical correction. Phenomenology which sees all relations as harboring and expressing meaning provides a method whereby we can locate the whole that unites its parts into a more significant unity.

What this means explicitly for environmental design can be fairly clearly stated. Whenever a designer looks at an environment, three principles must be foremost in his mind. First, things are meanings, not material objects. Second, these meanings are nodal points of expression that open out into a field of relationships. Third, the goal of environmental design is to knit together these concentrations of meaning so that the participant-dweller can experience the radical unity that binds up these different qualities.

Sacred architecture, in particular the Gothic style, is a paradigmatic example of this. At bottom and in essence the medieval energy that created Chartres saw that all building is interconnectedness. Furthermore, this ensemble of wholeness had a double level—both functionally and symbolically it addressed the human person as a whole. This laverin established connections between levels so that a single "thing" could express two or more meanings at the same time. Thus a polyvalent symbolism emerged that provided a point and moment of convergence within which the whole and its parts could be experienced. I speak, of course, of the architecture of light that is at the heart of the stone of Chartres. The first "solar" architecture suggests to us what we can do with our own more profane environment. The suffusion of the whole through the parts and the parts' particular mirroring of that luminous whole constitute the "more" of the Sacred. The metaphysical genius of Medieval Being created a vertical axis that allows for the horizontal spread of the human as its mirror-image.

Throughout the architecture of the Sacred there is an insistence upon limitations of the human condition. Yet paradoxically, this endorsement of finitude evokes the sense of the infinite. The gift of finitude is the recognition of what lies beyond. Once more, we see the principle of identity through difference yielding up a sober and concrete truth: It is the finite that grants access to the infinite.

The ultimate human recognition of finitude is death. What does the question of death have to do with environmental design? Our landscape is littered with the blunted corpses of desire. Everywhere one looks, the objects of failed desire obstruct our view: Shopping malls, parked cars, discarded furniture, and obsolete appliances—to name but a few elements of our de trop culture. At the same time, scarcity and limits are used to describe our era. How can we reconcile these opposing realities?
When we speak of death, we speak of the human experience of the end of time. This is the heart of our conflict. It separates us from nature. In nature one sees processes evolving in time towards wholeness and incompleteness. That is to say, in nature, the flower that completes the shrub dies as its seed is cast forth to begin the cycle again. Passage characterizes natural time, and the wholeness that is encountered in nature forever leads towards incompleteness. To be whole and incomplete is nature’s answer to the middle of death.

And what of our human response? Do we refuse the gift? And how can death be regarded as a gift? Martin Heidegger in Being and Time called death “my ownmost possibility.” This means that death is the occasion for authenticity; that is to say, I can only be myself when I face up to my own possibility of not being. Death seals my being with a stamp of resoluteness. It is in the face of my death that I achieve my being through my activity. Thus death is no enemy. It is rather “my own.”

In a culture plagued by failed desires such words are bitter medicine. Yet they capture the essence of the metaphysics that lay at the heart of our environmental discourse. To be a “One,” a definite this, is not to be another. Owning up to one’s limits is the meaning of the acceptance of death. Nature has no difficulty in attaining this, for its wholeness constitutes a passage into incompleteness that makes death understandable and bearable. In a culture such as ours no equivalent understanding of limit and death seems available. We preach fraternity but squander our present for the sake of having more. We deny death as a matter of cultural course.

The radiant derives from the unity of wholeness. It flows from a single source, establishing lines of connection throughout the world. In following these lines of radiance as they shine through our bleak landscape, certain objective lessons stand forth.

In the first place, understanding of the human/environmental matrix must proceed by way of unity. To be together, however, is not to descend into an undifferentiated sameness. Such a lack of difference is the very hallmark of our built environment. Rather what is required is the unity that arises through real, particular, insisting parts relating to a complete whole. This one, as we may wish to call it, is more than the sum of its parts. The “more” associated with the whole is the result of its fundamental drive towards novelty, difference, and change. This is the lesson of nature. The completeness of nature concludes with an invitation to start again. Thus death is the passage to a fresh start.

Novelty arises from the perpetually perishing. Being born and dying constitute the boundaries whereby the universe edges into the advance of novelty.

From this metaphysical perspective, death is the very gift of value itself. It sets limits and lets us be our very real, particular, measured, and stubborn selves, yet this firmmade by reason of the whole passes over into the whole and thereby adds to its weight, value, and passage. If we seek immortality, it can be said that the opportunity is already there. We become part of the great community, and our contributions are not measured by reason of self-interest but rather by their meaning for others and for the whole. Thus a metaphysics of unity through relations of meaning lifts from the shoulders of humankind the need for selfish satisfaction of desires. In place of our fragmented landscape of bleak desires, we face a beckoning whole that invites our individual participation.

In sum, then, the environment—natural or built—shows forth a relational unity that suggests ever wider wholes tending toward incompletions. At the very least environmental studies ought to incorporate analogical thought within scientific studies. Such comparative thinking would allow us to think, particularly, parts, and even desire and human death
against a backdrop of meaning, wholeness, unity, and activity. Such thinking constitutes a new course of study for all students of the environment—an educational whole that would replace the obsessive craving for technique that now dominates much of what passes for ecological study. Metaphysics, in other words, has never died. It lies obscured at the heart of all environmental inquiry that seeks a complete self-understanding.

NOTES

1 The Symposium took place in the Fall of 1983 under the auspices of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences. Participants whose papers were drawn upon in this work include: Robert Magnerauer, Rotand Bogner, and Gary Coates. Further information about the participants can be obtained by writing the Chairman, Professor David Szayon, Department of Architecture, Kansas State University, Manhattan, ks.

2 This is, of course, the thought of Hegel. See the "Preface" to The Phenomenology of Mind.

3 Maurice-Prou's Phenomenology of Perception is a sustained analysis of this primacy of somatic intelligence in terms of our being in the world.

4 See, for example, Ernest Becker's The Denial of Death for a complex analysis of how the refusal to die constitutes the very ground of our culture.

5 The work of Alfred North Whitehead is a complete and coherent study of the meaning of this insight. See, for example, Part V, "God and the World," in Process and Reality.