

Chapter 5 - Place

Phenomenology



Figure 5.1. Pretoria in 1872 by Thomas Baines shows the current day Lions Bridge towards the city centre.

Phenomenology of space

What we see and experience is very much influenced by our culture and memory, for this same reason, the way in which we interpret space is also influenced (Corner, 1999: 3). The way in which we interpret space is not only a result of culture and memory but is largely influenced by time, never passive but changing and active, always demanding extension and re-intervention toward developing some form of contemporary culture (Corner, 1999: 5). Therefore, the argument arises that if culture and memory change and adapt over time so does landscape and our surrounding context. Thus our landscapes are not 'given' but made and remade - an inheritance that demand to be recovered, cultivated, and projected toward new ends (Corner, 1999: 12).

If this is true, the cultivation and recovering of the past means that the past is part of the future and the future an interpretation of the past. Consequently, the landscape will take on different meanings over time and that time itself will play an important factor in our lives, changing our memory of the past.

It is for this reason that time should be acknowledged as a critical dimension when planning space (Corner, 1999: 13). Change is a direct by-product of time and that landscape must pass through stages from inception to maturity.

Consequently, the landscape and design play an important role in addressing social issues regarding community planning, housing, and recreation.

Corner (1999: 15) addresses the importance of time and place, and the concept that landscape is always changing. However, as it is always changing, the question of how we embrace change without losing the essence of a place arises and what is the essence of a place is if it's in a constant state of flux.

Considering the ever-changing environment and its endless possibilities, there is a phenomenological explanation for what the essence of a place is. Establishing the sense of place is creating meaning of a place i.e. the essence of a culture, of an image or a place cannot always be translated visually. It is that image people take away from a site and which draw people back to a space (Norberg-Schultz in Nesbitt, 2005: 414).

Heidegger, for instance, explains that 'place' is understood as quantitative, 'functional' sense, with many different properties in accordance with cultural traditions and different environmental conditions. The functional approach to place would be the concrete 'here' that gives it its particular identity or character (Norberg-Schultz in Nesbitt, 2005: 417).

However, the question architects and designers should be asking themselves is what can't be seen or is lost, that or what makes a space more qualitative and less analytical. This is where phenomenology offers designers an escape and different perspectives on what space should be. "Phenomenology was conceived as a "return to things", as opposed to abstractions and mental constructions (Norberg-Schultz in

Nesbitt, 2005: 414)."

Thus, more attention needs to be placed on the phenomenology of the daily environment, and life experiences, where people can create intimate connections and meaning of their environments.

Heidegger explains that nature forms an extended comprehensive totality; a 'place', and within a context creates an identity. This identity, or 'spirit', may be described by means of the kind of concrete, 'qualitative' terms (Norberg-Schultz in Nesbitt, 2005: 417). Heidegger explains this concept using the Greek Temple on the hill (Norberg-Schultz in Nesbitt, 2005: 418) see (figure 4.18:28) and uses the analogy to characterize earth and sky. With this approach, one might arrive at an existentially relevant understanding of landscape, which according to Heidegger and contrary to Corner's view, ought to be preserved as the main designation of natural places. The buildings can furthermore relate to their environments by resting on the ground and rising towards the sky (in Nesbitt 2005: 418).

Fusing Place

Memory

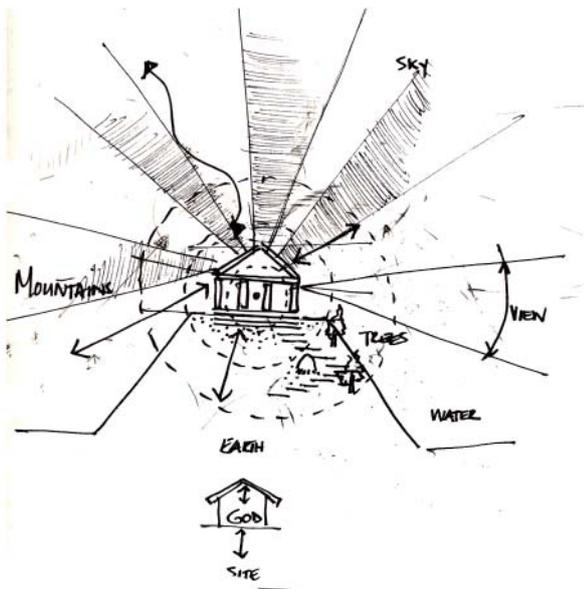


Figure 4.18. Interpretation of Heidegger theories on spirit of place and the manifestation of place. (Author, 2011)

The design of the archetypal Greek temple is concerned with bringing something into presence and revealing its truth through art. In order to reveal the truth about the work of art, the following questions must be asked: Firstly what is thus preserved? Secondly how is it done?

Indirectly, Heidegger answers both these questions (Norberg-Schultz, 2005: 418). The 'what' is our question and consists of three components; firstly the temple makes God present, secondly it fits 'together' what shapes 'the destiny of human being', and finally, the temple makes all things of the earth 'visible' - the rock, the sea, the air, the plants, the animals, and even the light of day and the darkness of night.

This theory applies to the project from the perspective that the architecture can reveal the importance of the heritage and memory that has been lost or forgotten. Creating spaces people can interact with one another and experience the character of the site.

Space denotes the three dimensional organization of the elements which make up a Place.

(Norberg-Schultz in Nesbitt, 2005: 412)

The structure and character of Place

The structure of a place is not a fixed external state. Rather, as a rule, places change, sometimes rapidly (Norberg-Schultz in Nesbitt, 2005: 412). This does not mean, however, that the genius loci necessarily changes or gets lost.

‘Landscape’ and ‘settlement’ are analysed by means of space which denotes a three dimensional organisation of the elements which make up a place, while ‘character’ denotes the general atmosphere, which is the most comprehensive property of any place.

In order to distinguish between space and character, one needs to establish each space’s individual defining elements i.e.: Space could comprise of boundaries, or a location a ‘concrete space’. But place can mean different things: we can currently define place as a three dimensional geometry or as a perceptual field, the three-dimensional totality of everyday experience which we may call ‘qualitative space’.

Many architects have made great efforts to define space in concrete, qualitative terms. Giedion (1998), uses the distinction between the ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ as a basis for a grand view of architectural history. Lynch (1960), delves deeper into the structure of concrete space with the introduction of concepts such as the ‘node’ or landmarks, ‘paths’, ‘edges’, and ‘district’; all elements that form the basis for man’s orientation in space (see urban context study, Chapter 7.3: 46), while Portoghesi defines space as a system of spaces (Norberg-Schultz in Nesbit 2005: 419).

Therefore spaces need to be made up of edges or elements that may lead from one place to another, across different boundaries. Or, as illustrated in Heidegger’s writing, are not seen as that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that, from which something begins its presencing (Heidegger in Nesbitt 2005: 419).

‘Character’ can therefore be defined by its presence and a more general and concrete concept than ‘space’. A phenomenology of character, therefore, has to comprise a survey of manifest characters as well as an investigation of their concrete determinants. Different actions also demand places with a different character i.e.: a dwelling: protective, an office: practical, a ballroom: festive, and a church: solemn.

When we visit a foreign city, we usually experience a particular character, which becomes an important part of the experience. Landscape itself also possesses character, some of a natural kind, others of a more man-made character. In general, all places should have character, and that character is the basic mode in which the world is “given” or “experienced”.

Character of a place is a function of time, changing with the time of day, weather or season, all factors which determine the different conditions of light. The character is determined by material and the formal constitution of place. (Venturi in Nesbitt 2005: 420).

Character can also be defined by boundaries, and are also dependent on formal articulation, which again is related to the way it is built. In other words, looking at how a building touches the ground and how it rises towards the sky. Particular attention has to be given to its lateral boundaries which determine the character of the urban environment. Architecture can therefore be defined as, “the wall between the inside and the outside” (Venturi in Nesbitt, 2005: 420).

Character, is therefore no longer an isolated concept between the inside or outside, and should therefore be taken through to the technology. So character is influenced by how things are made and put together, and therefore determined by the technical realisation of ‘building’. “The Greek word *techne* meant a creative ‘revealing’ of truth, and belonged to *poiesis*,

that is, ‘making’ therefore phenomenology of place, comprise of the basic modes of construction and their relationship to formal articulation” (Heidegger in Nesbitt, 2005: 420).

Conclusion

Man ‘receives’ the environment and makes it focus on buildings and things. Thereby the ‘things’ explain the environment and make its character manifest (Norberg-Schultz in Nesbitt, 2005: 421).

The external purpose of the building (architecture) is therefore to make a site a place that uncovers meaning in the given environment.

The structure of a place is not a permanent, eternal state and as a rule, places change. This does not mean that the spirit of a place needs to be lost. Therefore to conserve or unearth a spirit of a place means to concretise its essence in ever new historical contexts. “What was there as possibilities at the outset, is uncovered through human action, illuminated and ‘kept’ in works of architecture which are simultaneously old and new” (Venturi in Nesbitt, 2005: 422).

Using these principles, the design will encompass the character of the site, create a dialogue between the new and old aimed at revealing the memory of the past and create new memories.

Genius Loci

The Spirit of place

Genius Loci is the spirit that gives life to people and places, accompanies them from birth to death, and determines their character or essence (Norberg-Schultz in Nesbitt, 2005: 421).

Louis Kahn defines spirit of a place as the genius thus denotes what a thing is, or “what it wants to be” (Kahn in Nesbitt, 2005: 423).

Lynch defines it as the natural structure of a place, that the world may be organized around a set of focal points, or broken into regions, or be linked by remembered routes. “Often these systems of orientation are derived from a given natural structure, where this system is weak, the image making is difficult and man feels ‘lost’” (Lynch in Nesbitt, 2005: 423), to be lost is evidently the opposite feeling of security, which distinguishes dwelling.

Man can ‘dwell’ in an environment when he is able to ‘concretise’ the world in buildings and things, things expressed as ‘art’ defined by words, as the “*imago mundi*”: the work of art helps man to dwell” (Norberg-Schultz in Nesbitt, 2005: 425). “Once man can dwell amongst art man can dwell poetically” (Friedrich Holderlin in Nesbitt, 2005: 426), and “Poetry does not fly above and surmounts the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling” (Heidegger in Nesbitt, 2005: 426).

Only poetry, in all its forms (also as the art of living) makes human existence meaningful, and meaning is the fundamental human need (Heidegger in Nesbitt, 2005: 426).

Architecture belongs to poetry, and its purpose is to help man to dwell. But architecture is a difficult art. Constructing practical towns and buildings is not enough. Architecture comes into being when a “total environment is made visible, this means concretize the Genius Loci, gathering the properties of place and bringing them close to man (Suzan Langer in Nesbitt 2005: 426). Architecture is therefore to understand the ‘vocation’ of place, and in doing so, we protect the earth and become ourselves part of a ‘comprehensive totality’.