

“The Triggering Landscape and the Anxiety of Response”

Dr. Lori Ryker

Placelessness pervades our built environment. In the past 15 years the infrastructure and constructions of a global market and commodity inspired public has come close to completely destroying local culture, vernacular language, and regional landscapes. While the phenomena of placelessness caused by these conditions is distressing this paper addresses a less obvious and more insidious condition taking place in our physical and cultural environment: the inability for architects to create place when sincerely focused on the idea of place. The disconnection between the creator and the creation of place appears to be one of perception and point of view rather than inability and loss of interest.

In her book, *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy Lippard makes a distinction between work that is *about* place from that which is *of* place. From this simple contrast Lippard conceptually clarifies a complex issue that creators grapple with when grounding their work. While one may look like or reference the subject, help us recall the subject or gain insight towards it, the other becomes the place. The difference between *about* and *of* for architecture is of critical matter when considering that the built fabric of environments and communities provides context and presence of a civilization's practices.

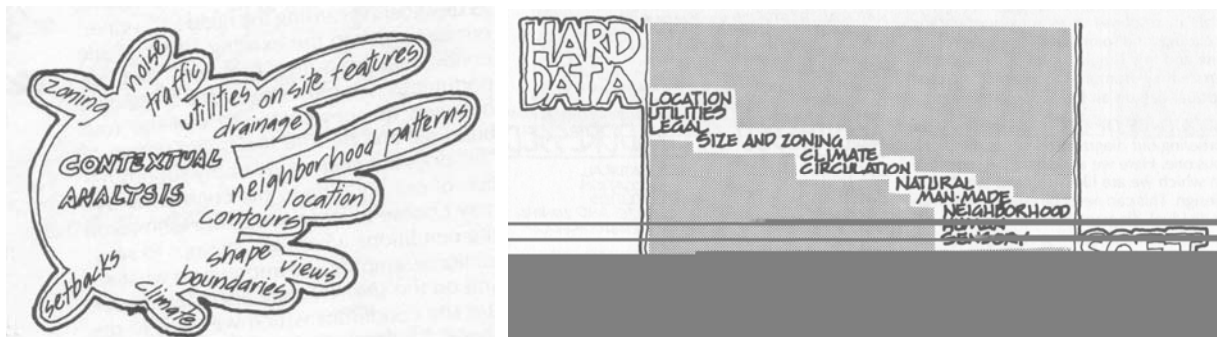
Over the past 25 years a large amount of the profession of architecture, both practitioners and academicians, have been preoccupied with idea of place, identity of place, sense of place and manifesting place. From Robert Venturi to J. B. Jackson, Ian McHarg to Kevin Lynch, the conception of our awareness of the environment in which we live has expanded. Each of these thinkers helped to shape the contemporary understanding of environment, context, and landscape. Each provided us with a sense of what architects are responsible for in these places. Some wrote with a certain quality of instruction or prescription, making their ideas adaptable and applicable in the context of academic instruction. One such example of the influence of these writer's attitudes is the adoption of books such as *Site Analysis* written to instruct and aid students in what they should understand about a site before they propose a design. From such books growing generations of architecture students have been indoctrinated through various ideas of the concern for place. Thousands of these students now practice or teach, some with great sense of responsibility to the lessons they learned in school.

Yet for all of their efforts I find that architecture and our built environment appears further away from becoming place than ever before. Our communities and neighborhoods, our parks and commercial centers sit apart from the places they are in. Buildings "are most often shallowly conceived, abstract structures of limited use. They are predominately designed as a response to building codes and built from materials promoted by the dominate construction industry. They serve as containers of commodity and enclosures of businesses conceived for the greatest financial gain in the shortest term . . . The "look" of a building is given attention for the sake of commercial communication or the requirements of building codes."¹



While we re-place places with our constructions we are losing the very environment we are inspired and influenced by. It is quite possible that as we continue to evolve the environment we live in, there will be nothing left of the original place, the place that triggers our imagination. What will remain are works about the place surrounded by thousands of works that having nothing to do with place at all. We will have what many call "placelessness," what Kunstler² calls the "geography of nowhere." Our attempts to create work *of the place* appear to be suffering from an anxiety of response towards the very thing that inspires us, while consequently linked to the intellectual foundation that provides for the success of creating works *about place*. The basis of the anxiety are the methods employed for learning and understanding the world. The way we currently take in and consider the landscape and place are beneficial to understanding certain objective aspects of the place while these methods, with subtlety and finality, teach us to disregard the necessary relationship of the place to the creator. We come to understand what we should consider of a place through a methodology that is objectifying, distancing and abstracting. Such a method has an inherent process for leading up to designs that are *about* place and not *of* place. Additionally, this method with its objectifying tenets places an unnecessary level of anxiety upon the creator who is concerned with providing the "appropriate" design response.

Let me provide some evidence for what I am speaking of. In the long employed studio reference *Site Analysis*, written by Edward White, the text is divided into “Kinds of Information” and “Diagramming Site Information.”³ The format and methodology of White’s book is drawn from a positivist position that was prevalent through the 1970’s and voraciously applied in schools and practices throughout the 1980’s and 90’s. The underlying assumptions of this position is that architecture best serves its clients as a problem solving devise where identifiable needs are met through a logical solution. As White writes “diagramming is a way to get close to the problem . . . [where] the profile of the design solution should mirror the profile of the programmatic requirements and conditions.”⁴ White clearly explains the value of considering context in order to “weave” designs into the existing fabric. “What is important” he says, “is that we make these decisions deliberately and thoughtfully so that the effects of our buildings on the site are not accidental.”⁵ Drawing from the concepts of context and weaving in mind White takes the reader through a myriad of considerations complete with instructional graphic diagrams that include issues of zoning, noise, utilities, and on site features; neighborhood patterns, shape, views, boundaries and climate. These issues provide categories for the collection of site data. Later in the book White offers an organizational method for the collected “data” that ranges from quantitative to qualitative, or hard to soft. White claims that distinguishing information in this way “provides us with a sense of those aspects of the site that are not negotiable, that cannot be compromised and must be addressed early in design . . .”⁶ White claims that the quantitative and hard data cannot be compromised while the qualitative and soft data is not as critical to the initial design phase. The diagrams also provide for the “dangers of mandatory attention by the designer at conceptualization.”⁷ From his chart we can see that location and utilities are mandatory for us to consider while natural and man-made is not. The suggested format to be followed is laid out in a matrix of “interdependency” that once assembled becomes the identifiable influences for interpretation to be applied when designing. The method for understanding a site described by White is both clear and *easy* to follow. I contend that its clarity and ease of understanding is the primary reason that we teach with this method and then later apply it in practice. The problem of designing place is not only created from books such as White’s but from instructors who use such books as the main and often exclusive teaching reference for understanding place.



Another problem between *Site Analysis* and the design of place lies in our lack of comprehension between the abstracting condition of site and the particular condition of place. While “site” is defined by the objective, definitive, measured constraints of a location, “place” embodies the extending, phenomenal, social, cultural, and environmental conditions of a location.⁸ When applying the abstracting analysis of site to the interest of designing for place we end up with a work that at its best is *about* place. Information about the site is assembled to describe the place through a buildings response to what the designer discerns about the site with little or no consideration for the potential relation between the creator and the place. We can analyze these buildings and identify the obvious conditions the designer drew from the site. For instance, we recognize the dominant views from the site by the location of large windows. We recognize the solar path through the year from depth and types of overhangs. We understand the need for insulation or breathability from the materials of enclosure. Such characteristics of a building are desirable but they primarily describe a physical condition of the building to the site. On their own, they do not extend the architecture to the place. My criticism is not that site analysis is an improper tool for gaining knowledge for design, but that it cannot take creators far enough into the understanding of the place, to encourage an intimate experience of the place. Doubly, the method favors limiting quantitative conditions inferring that such conditions are *the* appropriate things to consider, design for and include. From these texts and their methods creators conclude that a formula must be discovered which appears to leave them with a heightened anxiety toward the ability to respond intimately, consequently short circuiting their innate design process.

We see this method in practice throughout the Western influenced world. I find one of the most disturbing examples of this practice pervading cities across the United States. Its creators call it New Urbanism. The proponent and designator of New Urbanism does not design architecture they claim, they design “codes.”⁹ I recognize a clear relationship between the method recommended in *Site Analysis* and the format inherent in the New Urbanist code process. According to Andres Duany, “we use what we learn to write an urban code; a code is a neutral instrument that does not necessarily prescribe a popular style, but rather allows it.”¹⁰ The subtext of their rhetoric is that the New Urbanist town will grow out of the accumulation of neo-traditionalist values held up by their clients. Alex Krieger, referring to Heidi Landecker’s critique, claims that the New Urbanist town is “not all that radically different from older suburbs . . . that they are producing, or maybe reinforcing, a new kind of conformity.”¹¹ Their goal is to provide viable rules for towns that are self-sustaining. While many critics have taken aim at the New Urbanists arguing that the communities will not be able to sustain themselves¹² or that the communities encourage a social elitism.¹³ I find their fault in the grand scale planning that supports an ideology that is *about* place rather than *of* place. When discussing the characteristics of coding Duany states that choices are made “such as mandatory balcony lines, or specific percentages of solid to void, or vertically proportioned openings, or a set of range of colors.”¹⁴ He is excited to note that they “have found that there are only seven frontages in the world: *seven* ways that a building can engage the street.”¹⁵ As a concession to the restrictive condition of coding Duany states that “one important way to ensure an appropriate measure of creativity is to allow civic buildings to remain wholly uncoded.”¹⁶ In a lengthy round table discussion at the Harvard GSD in July of 1996, Duany commented continuously on the aspects of coding, prescription and development relative to making place; not once addressing the necessary role of the creative mind in making place. His view is aligned with the pragmatic method that provides pseudo-nuances of a place. The results are developments *about* place, abstractions themselves. These results do not fall solely on the shoulders of the New Urbanist codes. But are shared by the architects who build there, following a similar design development method outlined in texts such as *Site Analysis*.

The problem created by New Urbanism lies in the conception of infrastructure that has imbedded within it codes that are generalizing and bland, prescribing a certain condition rather than providing opportunities for the unforeseen. What I mean by this is that the codes provided by the New Urbanists instead of contributing to making place, support the development of environments that are *about* place. The New Urbanist community is not *of* place because it does not support the necessary relationship between the creator of the thing and the thing of consideration. Codes do not support the creation of poetry. Instead the work and infrastructure are objectifying, communicating facts, and anxious representations, rather than embodying and becoming the place itself. While the buildings may have the appropriate solar and wind relationship to the locale, they reside within the codified picket fence, sitting side by side along a street of critically evaluated width and length. The buildings have the requisite overhangs, good natural light and are clad in a prescribed palette of materials that define a community of sorts. They ascribe to a particular traditional language of domesticity, they have “cozy” characteristics such as porches and breakfast nooks. None are further than walking distance to a community park or store or office suite. Yet these qualities only add up to a community that is *about* place, a community that supports nostalgia for someplace they wish could be. The attributes that New Urbanisms offers are a product of pure analysis of existing conditions. The problem with this tactic is that living places continually evolve becoming place as they reflect the continual inspired modifications of an attentive society. No answer from analysis can provide this condition; only our imaginations and the fictions we write for ourselves can provide such places.

I mentioned earlier that these aspirations, although noble, are failing because they are missing poetry. In order to clarify the necessity of poetry I will employ the ideas and work of two individuals who grapple with the creation of place. The first individual is the poet and teacher Richard Hugo, the second is the contemporary painter Russell Chatham. From their considerations the oversights of the architect will become clearer.

In his book, *The Triggering Town*, Hugo clarifies the essential issue of the creative subject for aspiring poets. Most specifically, the issue of concern is the state of mind of the creator and the subject/object relation of the creation when combined with the medium of expression. Hugo is clearly aware of the changing perception of words in contemporary use and the potential loss of their poetic power. He is interested that young writers recognize the value of words beyond their discursive use arguing that “once language exists only to convey information it is dying.”¹⁷ In such written context the words are only employed in the most pragmatic and simplistic terms. Hugo elaborates on this concern claiming that with the reporting of facts or information, the “relation of the words to the writer is so weak” while the relation of the words to the subject is strong. Yet when writing a poem “the relation of the words to the subject must weaken and the relation of the words to the writer (you) must take on strength.”¹⁸

Hugo clarifies the condition of weakening when he gives students the example of writing a poem with a town as the triggering subject, inferring that deep within our psyche the “poem is always in your hometown.”¹⁹ The problem for creating poetry from our hometown is that we know too many particulars of our hometown which hold us back from letting go of the subject we know in order to find the essential drive of the poem. The “hometown often provides so many knowns. . .that the imagination cannot free itself to seek the unknowns.”²⁰ To create poetry the creator must take “emotional possession of the [unknown] town” making it their own. In making the town your own you can let go of the loyalty to truth (facts) that would otherwise preoccupy you when creating. Hugo goes on to say that “if you have no emotional possession of it for the duration of the poem” the creator more easily invests in the language of expression.²¹ Hugo’s suggestions to poets may seem quite distant to the instruction required for the architecture student. Yet there is a major similarity to the profession’s practice and preparation for design. From the lessons of theories such as Lynch’s we have drawn instruction that can be found in *Site Analysis* that have subsequently been memorized and recited by studio teachers for what to consider when designing for a “place” or “site;” consider wind direction; take into account the solar paths and the seasonal variations, measure the boundaries of the legal limits, consider and make note of the visual qualities, record the phenomena of the landscape. Recent additions to the canon of site analysis include qualities of the bioregion, the carrying capacity and indigenous materials of the place. Architects are taught to record all of this information, remember it and prepare to draw from it for the forthcoming design. All of this data collection is relevant to the place, and helpful to the creator in one way, while limiting in another. From these observations we know the discursive characteristics of the place too well, the place comes to us like our hometown that is defined by the facts and the “conditions” of its definiteness. We remain focused on the facts and find it difficult to make the place our own. Our obsession is tied to the information we gain about the place, and we construe that from this obsession and careful consideration we will create place or for the place. Instead, what happens is the three-dimensional retelling of facts, in a somewhat stylized form. Architects who are interested in the cultural and natural qualities of the place of their commission miss the opportunity to extend the place and instead their buildings are abstractions that “map” or “read” particular conditions but never intimately contribute to the environment. From our methods of education that teach us to appreciate fact over fiction, and rationality over inspiration and intuition we exclude fiction, inspiration and intuition from our creative process. We simply pass over the personal and subjective condition of creating and step directly into the factual. In this process we are more interested in the conditions of the site than the relation of the self to the place, missing the opportunity to make art *of* the place. In Hugo’s words we are not the poet creating poetry, but the reporter recording the conditions we find.

To create *of* the place, to supplant the facts of the locale in order to make place from your own impressions requires dwelling in the place. Dwelling is both a mental and physical *being* in the place.²² According to Martin Heidegger, dwelling engenders preserving and sparing for that place.²³ Here preservation is not intended to conjure nostalgia but continuity and caring for. Dwelling is an essential condition of being that encourages the interrelation of the subject and object producing a particular and unique, yet inexplicably universal response by the creator. The response, the creation of art, embodies the place, specifically calling out something beyond the place, the timeless and boundless qualities of the universe that make significant the place itself.

In order to elaborate on what this process of dwelling and creating could be for architecture I will briefly discuss the painter Russell Chatham. Chatham has worked toward creating expressions of place for over forty years. In his lifetime, he has taken two landscapes for his “triggering subject.” The first was his childhood environment of Northern California, specifically Marin County and the Point Reyes area. The second is Montana, the environs that have been carved by the Yellowstone River and bound by the Absaroka and Gallatin Mountain Ranges. He left his native California primarily because it became too costly for him. Chatham is unique to most successful painters of the modern era in that he has not sought fame, and has squarely rejected the critics and museum structure, surviving despite his national obscurity. While Chatham’s determined lifestyle is well worth noting as lessons to live by, it is not the subject of this paper. What is of particular relevance to this paper is Chatham’s practice. By choice of subject, Chatham is defined as a landscape painter. While he does paint landscapes, he does not follow the tradition of documenting places, of packing them in with nostalgic qualities or simply recreating what is already “out there.” Although Chatham squarely and honestly states that all creation is derived from something else, he will also tell you that he paints from memory. While Chatham’s works hold with them the places of their titles, they are not pictorial representations but link the viewer to the place through his internal view of the world. In this way Chatham is not pre-occupied with the facts of the place, but allows the place to linger within him. This lingering brings the place into his soul. Chatham becomes the places that triggers his imagination and he paints through his unique vision.

Quite simply stated Chatham says, “I paint the way I see things.”²⁴ Yet his seeing is bound to long term experiences and in-depth knowledge of the place. When speaking of his inspirations, he says that he must be able to inhabit where he paints; from within his memory he occupies the space beneath the tree if he is painting the tree, or walks the meadow or along the river bank. It is this intimacy both first-hand and remembered that bears out Chatham’s creating *of* the place. When speaking of painting in relation to the landscape he says,

*I couldn’t tell you what the poetic feeling is that I get with a landscape, but I just know that it is there. A painting should be a poem, a thing which cannot be translated out of its original state: it is what it is. The origin of a true painting is the spirit, the soul of the painter.*²⁵

This condition, Chatham’s revered ability, did not come without effort. When he arrived in Montana he found the landscape so foreign that it took two years for him to gain a sense of the place, to begin to paint it as it was for him. Chatham’s sense of the Yellowstone valley has magic for those who both experience his work and the place of his work. The journalist Jim Fergus, who came to Montana to write an article on Chatham, wrote, “I notice this evening as we are driving through the Yellowstone River Valley, that the land has come to appear like a Russell Chatham landscape, as if in some peculiar and elementary way he has altered my perception of it, defined and enriched it.”²⁶

From Hugo’s concern for the creator’s source of inspiration and the idea of the triggering town architects can learn that the loss of poetry in their work leaves only the banal retelling of the environmental condition in objective terms. In Hugo’s terms, Russell Chatham’s paintings move beyond the landscape that triggers his imagination into the realm of poetry, making the place through our perceptions and imagination. From Chatham’s practice architects can learn that art requires not the *re*-presentation of the subject, but deep personal investment from the creator to bind and extend the work to the place. If architects are to take responsibility for their work, to recognize its necessity as art and not mere building; if the work is to be *of* the place and not *about* the place, the subject of preoccupation must lie within the creator and not outside. The limited value of abstraction and objectification must be recognized and we must become aware of the anxiety such methods precipitate when searching for the triggering subject. These tools must be set aside for a time in the architect’s process while the experience of the place as a non-objectified whole mingles with the creator to become the imagined and created potential place. Architecture from such origins would be seen as the art critic Etel Adnan saw Chatham’s paintings in relation to their place, “I was looking at one and then at the other, wondering which I preferred or liked most, until they became one.”²⁷



-
- ¹ Ryker, Lori. *The Creation of Second Nature: The Problem of Making for Students of Architecture*, (College Station, Texas: UMI, May 2000), p. 1.
- ² Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-made Landscape*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1993).
- ³ White, Edward T. *Site Analysis: Diagramming Information For Architectural Design*, (Tallahassee, Florida, Architectural Media, 1983).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p.3.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.7.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p.122.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.122.
- ⁸ Lippard, Lucy. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multi-centered Society*, (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 4-20.
- ⁹ Saunders, William. Ed. *Harvard Design Magazine*, "Urban or Suburban", (USA: Harvard GSD, Winter/Spring 1997), p.48.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.53.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.53.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p.52.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.50.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.49.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.49.
- ¹⁷ Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979), p.11.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.12.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p.13.
- ²² See Martin Heidegger's discussion of the meaning of Being in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), p 149.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p.149.
- ²⁴ *Russell Chatham*, (Seattle, Washington: Winn Books, 1984), p.53.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.44.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.51.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*,p.4.