

THE POWER OF PLACE  
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QUEST BOOKS 1991

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## 23

### *Making Places Sacred*

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#### *I. Do We Need Sacred Places?*

Sacred places seem alien to our culture. Yet in an important sense, we very much need to hold all our places sacred. The places we make act as mirrors to our lives. They reflect the good or ill, passion or indifference, with which we hold them back onto the people whose lives they touch. Places, as well as people, draw sustenance from how they are held in our hearts. How we feel towards them does strongly affect our lives.

A friend once commented how tourism was destroying the cathedrals of Europe. "Each person came," he said, "and took away a little of the cathedrals—in their cameras, in their mind, or in their conversation—and now nothing remains."

As I thought about that, I realized that all places live through the reverence with which we hold them. Without that reverence, they crumble to pieces unloved, unmaintained, abandoned, and destroyed. That reverence is the glue that in reality binds the stones, the blood that sustains the life of a place, and the power that raises the funds for its upkeep. And it is that reverence first which is taken away, piece by piece, flashbulb by flashbulb, tour bus by tour bus. Without it, a place has nothing to give to those whose lives it must sustain, and they in turn fall into the same dereliction.

Far different is the visit of a pilgrim. A pilgrim brings love and reverence, and the visit of pilgrims leaves behind a gift of their reverence for others to share.

We lessen the soul of all places, and ourselves as well,

when we take without giving and come to them without reverence to life and to land, to people and to place, to ourselves and to the creation of which we are part. This is the root of the destruction of tourism, and also where we can find a healing power for our land and our lives.

## II. What Kinds of Places Are "Sacred"?

Places which are held sacred vary immensely in their nature and their reasons for being valued:

*Physically special places* with unusually powerful patterns of nature draw us apart from our everyday lives and into awareness of primal forces. Sacred mountains, lakes, the redwoods, Glacier or Yosemite rarely fail to make a powerful impact on us.

*Places where our actions don't dominate*, such as national parks or wilderness areas, allow us to shed the self-centeredness and self-importance of our actions and dreams and become aware of the greater context within which we are embedded.

*Special places enhanced by enlightened building* have in rare cases been able to embody particularly powerful visions of our universe and our place in it. The palace and gardens of Louis XIV at Versailles give an unmatched expression of "power over nature." The layout of the temples, lakes and waterways of Angkor Wat in Cambodia embody without parallel their society's vision of the sacred act of distributing the waters and prana of life throughout the land.

The chess pavilion on Hua shan in China conveys a unique sense of "life among the gods." Zen gardens in Japan convey a depth of action attainable only by individual experience of the depths of knowing. The feng-shui of Chinese pagodas or Alpine village churches communicate a powerful sense of balance and peace with nature. The Kailasa Temple at Ellora, carved out of living rock, conveys an unmatched intimacy with our planet, economy of means, and sure and living sense of the power of sacred imagery. Together, these suggest the special power which can, on occasion, be evoked through our building.

"No" places, by merely placing some limit on our actions, remind us in unequivocal terms of the necessity to limit our dreams and use of power. The sacred cows of India and the Ise Shrine in Japan show the flip sides of this



*Vision questing site in Rocky Mountains*

powerful kind of statement. By saying no to access or to denying access, they convey the significance of limits—of not letting anything become all-powerful.

*Places of important history/context*, such as the Dome of the Rock, the Lincoln Memorial, or the Agora of Athens, hold before us events, actions, lives, and places which have stood witness to values we hold high.

*Places with special electromagnetic conditions* have long been held sacred. Hawaiian birth centers, favorable Chinese feng-shui locations, English cathedrals, vision-quest sites, and Serpent Mound all give documentary evidence of the proven ability of places with unusual electromagnetic field conditions to influence human activities favorably, either materially or through our belief systems.

All this suggests how varied and powerful sacred places can be, but also that their real significance may not lie in the places themselves.

## III. Making Places Sacred

*What is significant about sacred places turns out not to be the places themselves.*

*Their power lies within their role in marshalling our inner resources and binding us to our beliefs.*

*Our act of "holding sacred" is the root, not the place where we choose to carry out that act.*

*It is in that act that we give places power to affect our lives.*

*In holding a place sacred, we grant power to a place and acknowledge that power of the place. As an ikon or through its own inherent patterns, we acknowledge its ability to impact our awareness of certain relationships and their value to us.*

*Sacred places thus forge and strengthen bonds between us and the universe in which we believe.*

*They empower us by affirming the wholeness of the universe we see revealed about us, and by reflecting our chosen place and role in that universe.*

*The inviolability of sacred places is essential. Through making them inviolable, we affirm the primacy in our beliefs of the values which they embody.*

#### *IV. Making Our Places Sacred*

Great achievements, such as Angkor Wat or Chartes Cathedral, give us a sense of the possible.

Equally important, however, is to know that the same possibilities lie within the scope of our own actions. Few of us has the power of a Khmer king, the real estate of Yosemite, or the honed skills of a Zen master. Yet what each of us has is enough. There is opportunity in every action to show what we love and hold sacred.

#### *Making Our Places at Home in the Universe*

A city is more than a place to work, and a home is more than a place to lay our heads. We reflect in our building the harmony we see in our universe. Doing so, we strengthen our confidence in sensing the underlying power and nature of the universe, and in our ability to fit within its flow and marshal it to our needs.

The order of a Chinese city or Renaissance palace, the symbolism permeating a Navajo hogan or Plains tipi, the spiritual directness of a Shinto sacred spring or Shaker furniture, the sacred geometries of Islamic ornament or Gothic cathedrals, or the bold power of a 20th century skyscraper all give voice to a particular universe felt and inhabited by their makers. In doing so, our architecture renews and strengthens that universe and those who inhabit

it. The sense of order with which we organize our places expresses our own sense of order and creation in our universe. Immutable Euclidian geometry, topological organization, fractal growth rhythms all offer vastly different opportunities.

Feng-shui presents another way to connect with our universe. The Chinese feng-shui tradition, and the divination used in siting temples and cathedrals in other countries, locates and designs homes, cities, and tombs in alignment with energy currents in the earth, creating a subtle harmony between buildings and their landscape. Aspects of the practice echo good ecology, good design, and good psychology, as well as good "energy." Equally important, they ensure that we bring our buildings, our beliefs, and our understandings of the cosmos into alignment with one another.

Ornament gives us a particular opportunity, free of the functional constraints of building, to infuse a building with our sense of cosmic order. The delicate interlacing geometries of Islamic ornament reflect the unfolding of the limitless forms of creation from a single source, as well as the eternally transforming relationships that tie together all of creation. The sculpture of a Scandinavian stave church or a French Gothic cathedral reflects their



*Buddhist Temple on Oahu, Hawaii*

society's view of their universe as purely and powerfully as does the sparseness of Shaker or Japanese design.

Ornament is important even in the austere beauty of Japanese temple design. The temples have long been cited as a prime example of the beauty of "pure unadorned structure." Yet on closer examination, the temples turn out to have layer upon layer of "ornamental" structure overlaying the actual structural members, to give a coherent sense of the beauty sought by the builders.

On a community meeting hall and tourist information center in Cannon Beach, Oregon, we are trying to infuse this sense of cosmic order through a major crafts component in the building. Our sense of our universe is undergoing dramatic new unfoldings, and little of this heretofore invisible universe has yet found expression in our building.

Aligning our buildings with our sense of our universe gives us the opportunity to affirm and clarify our beliefs. It strengthens those beliefs and our resolve to keep our actions in positive concert with them. And it renews within us the wonder and joy of being part of an awesome and incredible creation.

### *Making Our Places at Home with their Surroundings.*

Powerful meaning is found, too, in how architecture ties us to the specialness of a place. No two places on our planet are entirely alike, and the communities of life that each brings forth are as unique as the patterns of its weather, terrain, geology, and its own surroundings. Each place has unique powers to stir our hearts and minds, and brings into being a human community as uniquely molded to the potentials and limitations of that place as are its communities of plants, birds, animals, and insects. In becoming at home in these places and responding to the special kinds of comfort, challenge, and sustenance we find in each, we become a different people. Whether Californian, New Englander, Southerner, or People of the Plains, we come to have special qualities of our own to give to the tapestry of human society.

When we live close to these natural surroundings, we come to know and love them deeply, and to build in ways which reflect our joy in being a part of them. Our buildings come to connect us to, rather than isolate us from, the

natural forces of the place and they take form from the special spirit of the place. Such buildings vent or hoard heat as needed. They shade from or welcome the sun and wind, depending on the season and place. Their palette of colors is attuned to the space-filling white light of snow country, the pastels of fog country, the green light of the forest, or the golden sunsets of the tropics. They know their world, and are fully a part of it.

There are buildings that do fit their region and evoke the poetic power of the region in our lives. Paolo Soleri's Cosanti residence in the Arizona desert fits into the desert itself. Earth-covered concrete domes and vaults nestle into the desert, tempering the heat of the day and cold of the night, giving shade or sun when needed, while blocking the piercing desert winds. Cape Hattaras beach houses become unique mesh-enclosed spider webs on stilts—open to summer breezes, but protected from sun, bugs, and storms. Northwest homes of log and cedar nestle their wide rain-sheltering roofs among the lush vegetation. Persian dwellings grow from a garden, not a building—a cool and verdant oasis in the desert.

Spurred by the Canadian architect Arni Fullerton, an interesting movement has developed concerned with "winter cities." Bringing people together from Japan, China, Scandinavia, and North America, the movement has made considerable advancement in dealing with the problems of winter living. Most significantly, though, it has focused on making winter a positive thing in people's minds, rather than a burden. Winter tourism brochures, winter festivals, snow gardens, skylights on homes to see the winter sky and the aurora borealis are a few of the outcomes that are developing a dramatic excitement and enthusiasm for winter.

Following their lead, we have been working in the Pacific Northwest on "rain gardens" to celebrate our endless rains. Such things as slug races and mud and mushroom festivals take advantage of the unique features of our region. In buildings in process, we have designed star rooms—sleeping rooms under wall-to-wall skylights—so we can stay close to the stars. In every house design, where possible, we place morning rooms, moonrise rooms, and sitting places to follow the rising and setting of the sun and moon and the cartwheels of the stars across our skies.





*Mt. Burdell, site above Miwok village of Olompali in Marin County, California*

Doing so, we stay aware of how the moon moves the tides of our feelings in harmony with those of the ocean. Being in touch with the sunrise and sunset, we stay in touch with the rhythms of work and rest in nature—rhythms of giving and absorbing that are important to acknowledge for our own health. With window seats, doorsteps, verandas, porches, and outdoor rooms, we can create places to live and work that nestle between protection and contact with our surroundings.

### *The Sounds of Silence*

Late one night at the Taj Mahal, I discovered that silence can be a vital tool of design. Alone inside the dome room, I felt the quiet swell to fill the majestic space. Even the sound of my breathing echoed. As it settled into silence, it drew me deeper and deeper into stillness. The silence was as eloquent as the finest music I have ever heard, and it penetrated into the core of my being. All the richness and beauty of the Taj was nothing compared to the power of its eloquent silence.

I learned by that to listen to our surroundings. Half-ignored music, unheard mechanical noises, and other

unwanted sound often dominate our places. In our own home we replaced a noisy refrigerator with a passive cooler. We eliminated noisy heating systems and use a wood stove and passive solar heating. We isolated laundry equipment and got earphones for listening to audio equipment. We planted shrubs where birds can feed and nest. We decided against dogs when we discovered that few things are more wonderful than looking up from your dinner to see elk emerge silently from the fog a few feet from your window.

Eliminating unwanted “music” and making space for welcome sounds of life can be one of the most important contributors to the peacefulness of our buildings.

### *Honoring Others*

A tree root once opened my eyes to the many ways our buildings deny the seamless web of love, awe, and respect that is part of the sacredness of our world. I found the old, twisted spruce root on the beach after a storm. I dragged it home, and eventually made it into the handrail of our stair. Its gnarled shape silhouetted against the soft light from inside nudged my mind every night as I came in from the dark.

Part of the root’s specialness, I discovered, was that it still held the history of its past life. Most building materials have had their history trimmed, sanded, and varnished away. The contortions of an old tree, like the wrinkles and stoops of an old person, tell of the adventures and struggles of its life. This is worth sharing. There is a beauty in that history and those shapes and a value in honoring those lives that have been given up into the making of our buildings.

Honoring others goes far beyond the use of materials. We can honor the self-worth of carpenters and masons by giving them latitude to do their best rather than their least. We can honor our guests as the English do with a parlor or the Japanese with art and flowers in a *tokonoma*.

By using the traditional design wisdom of a region, we can honor the work, insights, and hard lessons of the past. By planting trees, we can honor a will to have a future. Providing opportunity for birds to nest, wildflowers to grow, and squirrels to play, we can honor the other lives with which we share our world. Whatever we honor—a

television, children, a good cook—shows in how we design and use our buildings. Our buildings speak clearly of where we place our values.

### *The Art of Saying No*

In an age of plenty, restraint (or learning to say “NO!”) can be one of the most important means of giving value. What we leave out of a building can be as important as what we put into it. The trappings of comfort, convenience, and luxury often stand in the way of simplicity, peacefulness, and harmony. Richness, expense, and obvious beauty are not necessarily the best and deepest ways to move our hearts. Learning to let go of our limitless desires is as essential in our building as in our lives. Lao Tzu long ago reminded us that emptiness is the essence of a teacup, and that the shaping and forming of empty space is the essence of making both a room and a window.

Some opportunities to say no can unfold new potentials for wholeness. Saying no to a noisy automatic dishwasher releases funds for other uses in a building. It enhances the peaceful quietness of our homes, and opens opportunity for quiet meditation or talkative sharing while doing dishes. Taken farther, it leads to “Zen dishwashing”—using a single bowl and chopsticks, rinsing the bowl with tea, and drinking it, thus eliminating the need for others to wash our dishes.

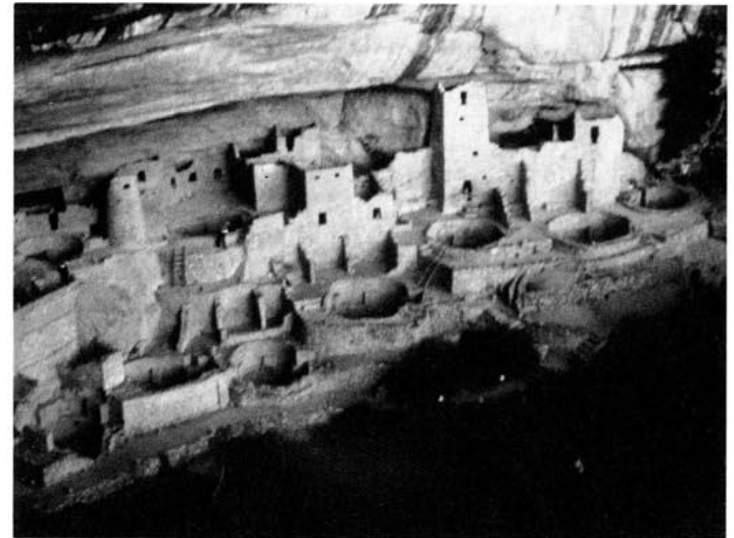
Looking at the handling of human and household wastes leads to compost toilets or other ways to recycle our wastes to the fields and gardens, to ways of eliminating packaging, and maximizing recycling materials. All these leave indelible marks on our living patterns and the nature of our buildings.

The stark simplicity of the Ise Shrine of Japan stands as a dramatic example of the power of saying no—of setting a place apart from our actions and honing simplicity to an ethereal power.

Some things need to be discovered, not pointed to. A special view may be less to us if we find a bench pointing it out than if we discover it ourselves and come across a convenient wall to sit on while we enjoy it. A building that shouts for attention soon becomes tiresome. We need to put ourselves actively into discovering, absorbing and finding meaning in things, for any depth of experience or

usable understanding to emerge. Unobtrusive surroundings provide the quietude to absorb, digest, and embrace the world with our deeper mental processes. Shadows are as important as sunlight.

A famous Japanese tea master was once given a piece of land with an outstanding view of the Inland Sea. When his teahouse was finished, his first guests arrived, eagerly awaiting the view. They were shocked to find that he had planted a hedge that totally blocked out the sea. Then as each bent to drink a dipperful of water before entering, a hidden opening in the hedge exposed a view of the waves breaking on the rocks below. The water in the dipper touched their lips as they saw the breakers below. Inside, when the master had finished the tea ceremony, he quietly slid aside the shoji screens, and the sense of water that still lingered on their lips (and in their hearts) was brought together with a vista of the sea below.



*Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado*

### *Love, Energy, and Giving*

Every building that truly moves our hearts conveys one message above all. That message turns out to be of unhindered pouring forth of love and energy into its making.

This is the boundless energy of a universe that creates, in exquisite detail and variety, even its smallest and least significant elements. It is the love and perfection, as Wendell Berry notes, that an old woman pours into an intricate piece of crochet work she knows she will never live to finish. This unstinted giving is found in the hidden parts of Gothic cathedrals—work whose perfection is visible “only to the eyes of God” and to the heart of the builder. It spills forth in the exuberant carving of Indian temples or the intricate design of Persian carpets. It lies like a blinding white light within the sparseness and purity of a Shinto shrine or Shaker chair, or in the embracing warm glow of a country hearth.

In some cultures this attitude of giving has been developed to great heights. Many temples of India are scarcely more than a spiritually centered framework to fill with sculpture. The temple construction is made possible through the giving of donors, and the sculpture itself is created as an act of devotion, offering, and spiritual growth by the worker.

Such an act of love or giving is the single most powerful act in making or using a place. The extra touch put into a door by its builder, the love with which a new marriage bed is built, the window added to see a favorite tree outside—all echo that love long beyond the lives of the makers. The most mundane building can be transformed through the spirit with which it is used, expressed in the flowers in the window, the well-scrubbed doorstep, or the smell of freshly baked bread. What counts is that someone has done the best, not the least, they could. And that comes not from necessity, but only from love.

### *Reflections in an Open Window*

Giving our full attention to details in designing our places can uncover unexpected potentials. Mirrors, for example, may seem an inconsequential part of our homes. Yet getting rid of mirrors can do wonders for our spirits. We stop seeing and thinking about ourselves, stop being so concerned with the outside packaging of people and things, and become more attuned and responsive to important inner qualities.

Relocating a mirror inside a closet or medicine cabinet door or on the back of a bathroom door can make it available when needed, but out of sight and out of mind when

not wanted. A mirror we cannot move can be covered with fabric when not in use, or we can tape pictures on it to cover it up. What would we really like to look at standing at the bathroom sink? An American bathroom with wall-to-wall mirrors looks into a very different world from that of a Japanese bath with a window open to a garden.

Giving our full attention to details, we begin to find where we have lost some of the richness of meaning we recognize in buildings of other ages. We see that Japanese architecture does not “flow” from inside to outside, but very specifically and carefully recognizes and creates places for being “in between.” We discover that windows and entrances unfold into special places for joining the inside and the outside, the public and the private, places for the ceremonies of greeting and saying goodbye. We rediscover the specialness and infinite variety of window seats and doorsteps that occur when the two different worlds touch.

### *The Four Elements*

A fireplace is an archetypal image of home, comfort, and security. It is so familiar we hardly pay attention to it. Experiencing fire, water, earth, or air intimately yet freshly, can add new vitality and meaning to our places. New feelings are awakened by curling up on a granite boulder still sun-warmed from the day, or napping on a rock nestled in an imprint made by a life form a hundred million years ago. Bathing outside in a tub with the snow falling around you, or inside with a fire or the moon reflected on the water; watching a butterfly wander in one open window and out another—things like this make new connections with the world around us.

In the end, all that really matters is that we approach wherever we live with full attention and an open heart. We must let our hearts guide us in deciding how we will inhabit that place. An open heart will embrace any new place and bring to it what is needed for a good life. It will find and make in it the “wholeness” that brings us to hold our places sacred. A bouquet of flowers, a song, the smell of freshly baked bread, an affectionate embrace, such things can transform any place into a happy, heart-warming abode.