

## University of Toledo | Notes | Spring 2008

I am not a philosopher, or a scientist

I am someone who cares deeply for the places I live in, their well-being  
And my ability to be in them.

More than a decade ago I began an exploration into the occurrences and changes to the environment I was witnessing as I traveled across the United States

My lens of understanding is primarily that of poetic understanding, rather than the predominate lens of rationality.

A clear way to explain this understanding is from an experience of my childhood.

*Uncles farm, no power, no running water.*

In order to have clean drinking water we retrieved water from the spring across the creek. It was commonly accepted that we could drink from the creek, too, when out doing chores on the farm.

By the time I was in college, the creek water was no longer safe to drink from. Drinking from all flowing water could get you sick.

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There seems to be a huge loss in our lives and our sense and experience of being in the world when we cannot experience the world directly. Through bottles and purifiers, for instance. Because we miss the “poetic” experiential understanding that we are apart of the world, the place that we are in.

This understanding – or its loss – is deep within us.

It results in a disengaged experience of the world

What I began to recognize was a brutality and disregard for our places, homes, and landscapes. Which seemed to be tied to our disengagement from the world in which we live.

Because – how could we do the things we do to our world, our places ourselves, if we were engaged/apart of them?

It seems there is something distressing about how we understand the world, our selves and ourselves in relation to the world.

What type of culture is created from a society that exists separated from the world they live in?

Much has been written about how we have arrived at our current cultural paradigm:

The Cartesian split between the subject and object  
Conceptualizing and abstracting things in the world, rather than seeing them in their totality

Relying on pragmatics and rationality over poetic thinking in the search for Truth understanding the world largely globally, which requires a reliance on generalizations rather than specific moments or qualities.

The paradigm by which modern society exists serves the creation of our culture: the practices of our lives, how we conceive and construct our thoughts and actions.

It is simple to state – that if the paradigm isn't assisting in the desired vision, it should be changed. But it is quite another thing for a shift to actually occur.

Even once a vision of change is initiated there is a long period of waiting for the shift to be felt in our lives.

Today we live in the space and time from one shift to another. We are in an exciting time of transformations. We are not completely of one mind-set – but in the shadows and half-light of what will come.

From this shift we will experience great success and failure, and potentially irretrievable loss relative to our interest in change. Our world will never be the same, and will not be the same in it.

There have been great cultural shifts before across the Earth's, the rise and fall of Greece, the shift from the Medieval mindset to Enlightenment, the rise and fall of Mayan civilization.

Each cultural vision results in effects upon the Earth, How we live, change and model the Earth to reflect our beliefs.

These shifts do not occur overnight. There is no one person who can see the change as it will happen, And while some people may recognize the need for a shift in concept, it has always taken a full crisis to have a civilization shift and reconcile themselves in the world. THEIR RELATION TO THE WORLD.

And in some instances the change does not occur before the civilization was lost or the environmental issues resulted in complete environmental devastation.

Are we at the point of crisis?  
With Global Warming? Maybe

How are we considering the need for changes?  
The type of changes?

Are we looking deeply into our ideology to shift from the roots? Or are we only looking at a shift what or how we act, but not how we think about ourselves.

As far as I can see, we are not considering our ideology – we are desperately holding onto the primary way we understand humankind in the world, while adjusting how we act.

Perhaps actions result in the slow arrival of understanding.

But what I see is that we are working through strategies for a problem that we can identify scientifically. This is a process that is steeped in the Cartesian way of understanding the world. Continuing to rely on abstractions, quantifications full of reliance on knowledge grown out of a belief in the fool-proof condition of rationality.

The problem is not using methods to gain knowledge, but that we continue to disregard other ways to know, Knowing which can serve to reengage us with the world.

These are simply intellectual tools that we must learn the appropriate time for their use.

Today the problem is Global Warming – we identify the condition, then the strategy of Carbon Foot printing to come to terms with the problem and people want to **solve** the problem by “buying” their way out of their practices – rather than changing their practices.

Because the experience of the practices remain disengaged from the experience of the world.

We never come fact-to-face with the actual experiences of loss – THE CREEK ON THE FARM, for instance.

Because we disregard poetic experiences.

We can recognize dwindling resources and beneficial qualities of the planet as a problem. And the solution proposed is to counter the loss of resources for future development and our ancestors through the loosely identified vision of sustainability.

Originally described in the Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." [1]

The Brundtland definition implicitly argues for the rights of future generations to raw materials and vital ecosystem services to be taken into account in decision making.

Today sustainability is a loose idea, a vision, which is explored and strategized in many different ways. The way an architect interprets and applies the vision is different than a research biologist.

The vision of sustainability is important and critical to address for the planet, the myriad creatures and plants, the rocks and waterfalls, the whole of the place.

But looking at the problems, and their solutions as singular episodes cannot successfully solve long term conditions without reconsidering our ideological assumptions. We must look to other ways to know and understand the world.

HOW WE ARE IN THE WORLD. BEING. The metaphysics of our existence.

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My work moves back and forth between proposing ways to solve current problems – such as the OFF THE GRID books, advising design clients on ways to live with less resources.

Through rational means

To creating architecture that helps people reengage themselves in the place they live.

Teaching students – helping them recognize their place and potential on Earth. Which hopefully gets at deeper issues of BEING . Engaging people with their places.

OFF THE GRID Books

Their goal is to introduce the ideas, the concepts, to empower people, to help them see and believe the possibilities.

They are simple tool books – I am not a technical guru in these areas, but I know enough to advise and coordinate the larger concepts for an architectural solution.

PRACTICE – PROJECTS OF ANTICIPATION

We must consider the issues of power use presented in the OFF THE GRID books, but as I have said before, these technical considerations are not enough to create change. To tip our practices into another sense of reality.

Art works in this realm. The tipping of ideas that we cannot quite explain or understand – the ambiguous, large, overwhelming issues. Art helps by reaching beyond the rational intellect and grabbing that part of us that is ruled by the emotions. Those experiences that we come to know first-hand.

Architecture has a participatory nature as an art, to help engage and inspire, not simply to shelter.

How is this achieved?

Creating anticipatory moments that potentially result in different experiences or practices to engage the occupant in the place.

Rather than people learning the “science” of the house, they experience the home in the place.

Poetic experience is first-hand sensory-emotional experience. Which helps us to understand our interrelation to the world. We become aware and engaged in the place. Knowledge through act.

## **Hall**

The frame of this house is built from trees felled less than 5 miles away from where this house is built. They were brought down from the hillsides of the forest by horse. This condition marries the house to the place – materially. But it also serves as a talisman in a way – a place to recall and remind us of the exchange that takes place between things that exist before and how we choose to change them for our own benefit. The home owner knows this aspect of her house. She can look at the forest covered hillsides and mountains and see the forest from which her house was built. There is both a sense of respect and responsibility that comes out of this condition of the materials. It is sense that is felt within, rather than learned as a book lesson

(Rather than simply building from lumber available at the lumber store, which is disassociated from the place, that we do not think about or identify with the location that it came from. That is the abstraction that I was referring to earlier, it is the same mind-set that allows us to feel good about buying-carbon offsets, rather than understand that the Earth is paying a price when we fly over it – and recognize that we must come to other ways of living on Earth.)

The rock that serves as the final step between the public part of the house to the private acts as a marker of passage. How we move from the social world to the world of intimacy. The rock was selected specifically for this location. And it is unusual to use a rock in such a location – up in the air. It gives pause to the transition. It makes us think about where we are coming from and where are we going, at the same time tying us to the place we are in because the rock belongs to the place.

## **Greenberg**

The roof waves like the hills that surround it, it is a poetic way to bind the imagination to the place, the landscape.

The light tracks across the concrete floors, they are like sparkles of light reflection on water.

This house has an unusual feature of a pool in the living room – the creek is just beyond.

## **Gumpel**

Clients asked for unusual things

One thing was not to see down to the valley floor and future development.

### Rammed Earth Wall

The interiors feel like moving through the landscape. The landscape slides in and out of the house in the way that walls engage with ceilings and windows fit between walls and roof.

## **OUTSIDE/IN**

This house uses the landscape and cultural history and the conditions of passive technologies to slip into the landscape.

siting

rainwater

gardening

green house

walking down the hill

angular spaces

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Reconsidering our assumptions and thoughts – reengaging ourselves in the world – how we understand ourselves through our culture: art, politics, >>>>>> will be what moves us beyond the current state of believing that “rationality” and science will solve all of our problems. This is not to say that rational thought and science are not valuable, but simply that it is not enough.

In 2003 I founded Artemis Institute. Its mission is to serve as a means for exploring the relation of nature, culture and spirit. The most active program of Artemis is Remote Studio.

The Remote Studio is a university level program for students of architecture and art which provides the opportunity for students to gain a better understanding of how their creative abilities are tied to their responsibility to the world.

the goals of the program are two fold:

- to provide students with first hand experiences that focus upon and empower their commitment to the world in which they live.

- to provide local communities near large wilderness areas with thoughtful, built interfaces that in-turn inspire their commitment and responsibility to the natural world.

The design/build project for the community is necessary to the mission of Artemis institute because how we understand ourselves in the world and react to it is directly tied to the quality and characteristics of the built environments in which we live and socialize.

This idea is very similar to a quote from Socrates that I recently came across.:

“We shall thus prevent our guardians being brought up among representations [music, sculpture, poetry, architecture] of what is evil, and so day by day and little by little, by grazing widely as it were in an unhealthy pasture, insensibly doing themselves a cumulative psychological damage that is very serious. We must look for artists and craftsman capable of perceiving the real nature of what is beautiful, and then our young men [and women], living as it were in a healthy climate, will benefit because all of the works of art they see and hear influence them for good, like the breezes from some healthy country, insensibly leading them from earliest childhood into close sympathy and conformity with beauty and reason...” Socrates

Simply stated, if we wish to embody the good in the world, if we wish to be engaged in the true, than we must live in the beautiful, good and true, or at the very least strive for it.

And we rarely focus on the “goodness” of architecture. We most typically focus on the cost, the salability of work, the practicality, the pleasing.

## EXPLAIN ORGANIZATION OF PROGRAM

It is easy to look at the Remote Studio and see the d/b program as a technical, skill building program. But if you look at it only this way, and understand it only this way, the intent of the program is lost.

Because the design/build experience is related to the whole of the lessons of the program. The program teaches people about themselves through poetic experiences, To know the world first-hand, to understand how you feel in the world in ACTION and then understand what you believe and how you interpret and reinterpret your past experiences into new lessons and ideas. TO be clear about our intentions, responsibilities and required actions.

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## CONCLUSION

I hope that the discussion of my work has helped to open up the larger issues we must work through regarding how we engage in the world. How we engage with one another. Because thinking about the developing strategies in support of the idea of sustainability will not be enough.