This *EAP* starts 23 years. We thank readers renewing subscriptions and include a reminder for "delinquents." We are grateful to subscribers who contributed more than the base subscription. Thank you!

This issue includes three feature essays. First, management and systems consultant Robert Fabian overviews his growing awareness of the importance of human dimensions of urban design, and Norwegian architect Akkelies van Nes considers architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz's contribution to a phenomenology of place and architecture. Last, retired educator John Cameron sends another "letter" from his rural home on Tasmania's Bruny Island. Accompanying his account of place as "gift" is art work by his life partner, artist Vicki King. Below, we feature her "Before the Storm." Also see her work on pages 13, 16, and 18.

**IHSR Conference, Montreal**
The 31st annual International Human Science Research Conference will be hosted by the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM), June 25-29, 2012. The theme of the conference is “Renewing the Encounter between Human Sciences, the Arts, and the Humanities.” Conference organizers are psychologists Christian Thiboutot, Florence Vinit, and Bernd Jager. Paper titles and abstracts are due by January 29, 2012. Tentatively, *EAP* plans to sponsor at least one special session relating to environmental and architectural phenomenology. Conference website: [www.ihsr2012.uqam.ca/](http://www.ihsr2012.uqam.ca/).
Between Heaven and Earth
Christian Norberg-Schulz’s Contribution to the Phenomenology of Place and Architecture

Akkelies van Nes

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Architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz’ Intentions in Architecture (Norberg-Schulz 1967) is his most internationally known publication. Unfortunately only published in Norwegian, his 1971 Mel­lom himmel og jord—Between Heaven and Earth—is a continuation of Intentions and extends discussion of philosopher Martin Heidegger’s “Building Dwelling Thinking” (Heidegger 1971).

Between Heaven and Earth is important because it presents the core of Norberg-Schulz’ work on place and architectural phenomenology. Drawing on examples from Norwegian, Italian, and North African places, the Norwegian text provides an inspiring source to extend Norberg-Schulz’s understanding of place and architecture. In this commentary, I draw on my place experiences in Norway and the Netherlands to reflect upon this book.

The Meaning of Dwelling

One of Norberg-Schulz’s key themes in Between Heaven and Earth is the question of what it means to be at home and bonded emotionally to particular places. He refers to a short story by the Norwegian writer Tarjei Vesaas entitled “Sistemann heim”—“The Last One Home”—in which the author describes the feelings for home of a young forester named Knut, who is in the woods felling timber.

One day Knut ponders what it means to belong to and know a particular place. For him, that place is the forest, and he remains there at the end of one working day, confirming his identity with the place. He feels how the sphere of the forest changes. He observes how the darkness leaks from the ground, from the sky, and from the horizon. The forest encloses Knut through the dawn. Norberg-Schulz explains how Knut’s place is revealed to him in this intense experience and illustrates a connection to a specific place that gives life meaning.

Vesaas does not describe a particular wooded place in his text. All the reader knows is that the place is a typical Norwegian pine forest. Vesaas writes:

Sja med mørket lek fram av skogbotnen, av himmelen, fra synsranda. Han er fange inn her.

See how the dawn leaks on the forest ground, in heaven, from the panoptical view. He is captured inside it.

Norberg-Schulz applies the concepts skogbot­nen (the forest ground), himmelen (the sky), and synsranda (the optical array or panoptical view) as basic elements for describing places at any environmental scale. All places, whether natural or built, typically have a ground or a floor; a ceiling, roof, or sky; and walls, trees, hills or other material forms shaping various types of optical arrays.

To dwell is an essential feature of human be­ings in that dwelling establishes a meaningful relationship between people and environment. Norberg-Schulz claims that, through place identification, we
give our life a presence and identity. In this sense, dwelling requires something from both our places and also from human beings.

Norberg-Schulz emphasizes that we must have an open mind and that places must evoke many possibilities for identification: “Today, many places offer poor qualities for identification, and people are not always open to or aware of their surroundings.” Norberg-Schulz speaks of an environmental crisis (Umweltkrise) in the way that the relationship between humans and place identity has been lost.

Norberg-Schulz points out that social science has so far been largely unhelpful in developing a qualitative concept of place. He finds more hopeful possibilities in art and architectural history, poetry and literature, and the writings of phenomenologists like Gaston Bachelard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Otto Bollnow, and Martin Heidegger.

**Features of Place**

Human identity conditions place identity. To understand place identity, Norberg-Schulz singles out concrete features of place, drawing on the concepts of *Jord, himmel,* and *synsrand*—the Earth, sky, and optical array. In other words, place identity first involves what we walk on, what is above, and what we are aware of around us. Each aspect contributes to how one experiences a place [1].

Thus, the Earth reaches out and rises toward heaven, a situation that expresses a qualitative difference between “up” and “down.” To describe the “character” of a place is to consider how Earth, sky, and the optical array uniquely interact. Norberg-Schulz contends that the interaction among extension, degree of verticality, and boundaries plays a central role in shaping the lived aspects of a place. For example, the optical array is the horizon—the outer limits of a place. Similarly, objects and openings in the landscape can relate to the sky and bring heaven down to earth in different ways.

To dwell, therefore, means to respect a place with all its constitutional elements and qualities. Sand is an important place element for desert dwellers just as snow is important for Scandinavians or water for the Dutch. Norberg-Schulz’ main point is that, to protect place, one must be open to its identity. A phenomenological approach means that dwellers and builders must take into account a place’s qualitative, mostly unmeasurable, aspects.

**Norwegian and Dutch Examples**

How can this notion of place identity be understood more precisely? Norberg-Schulz’s first example is the Norwegian forest, which, he says, has wide topographic variations. One has no overview in this forest. Because of stones, bushes, moss roots, and an irregular topography, the forest floor is not uniform but diverse. “Heaven” in this forest is glimpses of the sky between trees. The optical array is mostly forest and hills. Sometimes, the optical array dramatically shifts because of mountains, water, or open spaces like meadows. Likewise, water elements such as streams and lakes contribute to changing topography and shifting light qualities.

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Norwegian Pine Forest

Traditional Norwegian Settlement
Traditional Norwegian Interior

Norberg-Schulz draws on his forest description to consider how Norwegians dwell. Norway has no urban tradition. The Norwegian dream is to live behind each hill or to live alone along river or lake. The house represents a “cave of trees.” The traditional Norwegian settlement is arranged around an open space (“tun”) that contrasts with the dense, pine forest beyond. Since winters are long and summers are short, Norwegians bring the nature of summer inside and incorporate strong, warm colors in red, yellow, blue, green, and brown, often coupled with flower motifs. White is seldom used.

Dutch Polder Landscape

I would argue that, in a similar way, the traditional Dutch lifeworld is best depicted by Dutch painters. The endless horizontal line of a flat, wet landscape is always present in the landscape paintings of Salomon and Jacob van Ruisdael, Jan van Goyen, Meindert Hobbema, and Rembrandt van Rijn. The sky takes up a large part in these landscapes paintings. Mostly, it consists of the clouds associated with unstable, windy weather.

In contrast with the wet, low landscape, settlements and built structures like farmhouses are located in higher, drier places sheltered by trees or other vegetation. These structures break up the landscape’s flat monotone. No surprises exist behind trees or hills. The heaven consists of clouds. Rows of trees have a regular rhythm rising up to heaven, while canals highlight the polder landscape’s horizontal extension.

How do the Dutch dwell traditionally? An English saying explains that “God created the World but the Dutch created Holland.” In contrast with Norway, the Netherlands has a long urban tradition incorporating water and other natural features. While traditional Norwegians might have preferred to live in a more isolated way, the Dutch have traditionally clustered in small, dense towns. In contrast with the monotony of the open polder landscape, every turn in a Dutch town offers some surprise.

Brick-and-Stone Buildings in a Dutch Town

The photograph above illustrates the brick-and-stone buildings in Delft. Water is an important element, and many Dutch prefer to have their homes adjacent to a canal. The buildings with their openings have a vertical orientation in contrast to the flat, open natural landscape. The traditional Dutch interior tends to include off-white or blue-white colored tiles, white walls, and wooden floors or tiles in dark colors.

Norberg-Schulz claims that, to be rooted existentially, human beings must open themselves to the particular typology of their surroundings. One must live with the “place spirit”—the *genius loci*—which,
in part, is determined by the things of a place. Buildings are things, and particularly important is the house, which not only satisfies material needs but also assembles a particular human world. First and foremost, buildings should mirror genius loci, and a house should contribute to its inhabitants’ sense of orientation and identity.

To build is to interpret the spatial structure and character of a particular place. Like Heidegger, Norberg-Schulz aims to develop a poetic, creative relationship with reality. Nature is not a resource but, rather, reveals how human beings might best exist in the particular place in which they find themselves.

Traditional Dutch Interior

**Place Structure**

In speaking of a built environment’s structure at various scales, Norberg-Schulz refers to the organizational pattern of buildings in relationship to the surrounding landscape, the composite form of built elements, and interior organization. He points out that, typically, a settlement and its built parts are visible as clearly defined units in the landscape.

This formal clarity contributes to the settlement’s being perceived as a thing for human beings. Neighborhoods and cities should have defined edges. Primary urban spaces appear as strong physical gestalts through their form and size. When urban squares and streets become too wide or too amorphous, human scale tends to get lost. Norberg-Schulz relates urban space with continuous borders to Gestalt psychology’s continuity principle; thus, free-standing buildings separated by too much distance are unable to contribute to viable squares and streets. In this sense, the removal of one strategically placed building can destroy an urban square’s vitality.

In regard to dwellings, Norberg-Schulz emphasizes horizontal and vertical relations as they express a particular mode of connection between heaven and earth—how roof form, for example, contributes to a silhouette related more toward the sky or more toward the horizon and surrounding landscape. He discusses how contrasting roof shapes can play a significant role in distinguishing one place from another.

Similarly, interior qualities can be described through geometrical forms and relationships. A centrally-planned room may seem sky-related, while an axially-oriented room may relate more to horizontality and to the Earth. Yet again, an oval-shaped room may integrate central and axial qualities so that the space seems anchored and extended simultaneously.

**Place Character**

Perhaps the strongest aspect of Norberg-Schulz’s work is his explication of how physical and spatial elements shape and strengthen place character, which, he contends, is influenced by many environmental dimensions, including qualities of light and the composition and colors of terrestrial surfaces. Likewise, horizontal and vertical rhythms in architecture and landscape play an important role in how a settlement is experienced as a place.

Norberg-Schulz claims that, partly, a settlement becomes a place when it either contrasts with or complements the surrounding landscape. In this sense, a traditional Norwegian settlement adjusts itself to the natural context, whereas a Dutch settlement’s verticality opposes the horizontality of natural landscape.

Similarly, urban character is dependent on environmental borders and surfaces. An urban space has floors and walls, while its “roof” relates to the changing sky, the experience of which can be modulated by towers, cornices, roof lines, and similar built features. Particular local paving materials and their sizing and layout contribute to the place’s
Norberg-Schulz gives particular attention to the wall’s doors and windows, which he says play a central role in defining a building’s inside-outside relationship (Thiis-Evensen 1987, 251-98). The size and shape of windows define a wall’s degree of openness, continuity, degree of massiveness or lightness, and rhythm. He depicts windows as the “eyes of a place.” For example, windows in Oslo’s older buildings regularly have a T-shaped cross-piece pattern. In the Netherlands, older windows often consist of a white frame, with an inner frame colored in dark red, blue, or green; sometimes upper parts incorporate stained glass in warm colors.

A room’s atmosphere is an integrated part of human being-in-the-world. While urban space expresses the character of locality broadly, any interior offers some partial variant on that character. An interior’s ambience relates to open and closed rooms, which have much to do with whether the interior connects to or is separate from the outside. This inside-outside relationship also relates to windows, including their size, shape, and placement. How much light they offer the interior is one of the most important aspects of the ambience of inside.

Norberg-Schulz emphasizes that the interior works as a place for human beings only when our home sustains our world. In this way, we dwell. This dwelling relationship is more obvious in traditional cultures, where necessarily there existed a meaningful relation between larger and smaller scales and between inside and outside.

**Weaknesses**

Though Norberg-Schulz’s findings in describing place character are well argued, he is less successful in dealing with place structure in that he regularly conflates normative and descriptive concerns. His use of Gestalt psychology contributes to his prejudice for ordered, harmonious, and beautiful places that are smaller-scaled, clearly delineated, and formally distinctively. What, however, of environmental and architectural meanings related to a place’s cultural and social dimensions? A clear understanding of how particular individuals and groups experience and understand place is largely lacking in *Between Heaven and Earth* and in Norberg-Schulz’ other writings.
All understanding of place is a value-loaded interpretation and ultimately partial—one subjective reading of reality. Such interpretation is a combination of place character (contributing dimensions to what the phenomenon is), place intentions (presumed actions and aims in regard to the phenomenon), and place meanings (cultural and social sources and expressions). Norberg-Shulz’s place interpretation largely focuses on place character and needs extension into the realms of place intentions and meanings, especially as situated in our complex postmodern world.

One can also argue that Norberg-Schulz largely ignores place order and structure. Clues to understanding order are offered by urban morphologists, who relate the spatial patterns of place to various socio-economic processes (Moudon 1997). These researchers focus, for example, on how planning law and property rules shape building patterns—a topic discussed nowhere in Norberg-Schulz’s writings.

In their research on space syntax, Bill Hillier and colleagues (Hillier & Hanson 1984) have articulated clearly defined concepts of space and spatial relationships that point to less obvious spatial structures that play a central role in a place’s relative degree of pedestrian life and informal street and sidewalk sociability. As Hillier (1996) has demonstrated, a built environment’s spatial structure plays a role in pedestrian and vehicle flows as well as in the spatial distribution of shops and crime. An urban place with few pedestrians is typically experienced as dull, dangerous, empty, or silent, whereas a lively street with many pedestrians is experienced as safe, robust, and interesting. The key is a less obvious spatial structure that Hillier’s work so effectively reveals but about which Norberg-Schulz was seemingly unaware.

Place character, place structure, and place order are shaped through social, economic, and political processes. In turn, these spatial properties have an impact on human feelings, attitudes, and actions. According to Norberg-Schulz, a phenomenological approach to place involves an understanding of local and cultural context. In particular, primary understanding in regard to architectural and environmental experience is grounded in concepts largely derived from Gestalt psychology, including his emphasis on closed settlements with clear boundaries.

Research on the spatial properties of built environments can contribute normative principles for how design might facilitate more successful places, though what the result might mean for users’ experiences is not easy to predict. For some users, design changes to place will be considered as an improvement, whereas for others, the same design changes may be seen as detrimental. “Place creators,” including architects and planners, are condemned to face criticism from clients and users, partly because client and user preferences are sometimes misdirected and partly because they involve contrasting understandings as to what a satisfactory place might be “between heaven and earth.”

Note

1. Norberg-Schulz’s doctoral student Thomas Thiis-Evensen would later interpret these three themes as floor, wall, and roof, which he called archetypes and used as the major organizational structure for his important phenomenology of architectural experience, Archetypes in Architecture (Thiis-Evensen 1987).

References

Hillier, B. & Hanson, J., 1984. The Social Logic of Space (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press).