

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

The Sites We Build On [Images that Motivate]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/18h8w0q8>

Journal

Places, 11(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Turnbull, William, Jr

Publication Date

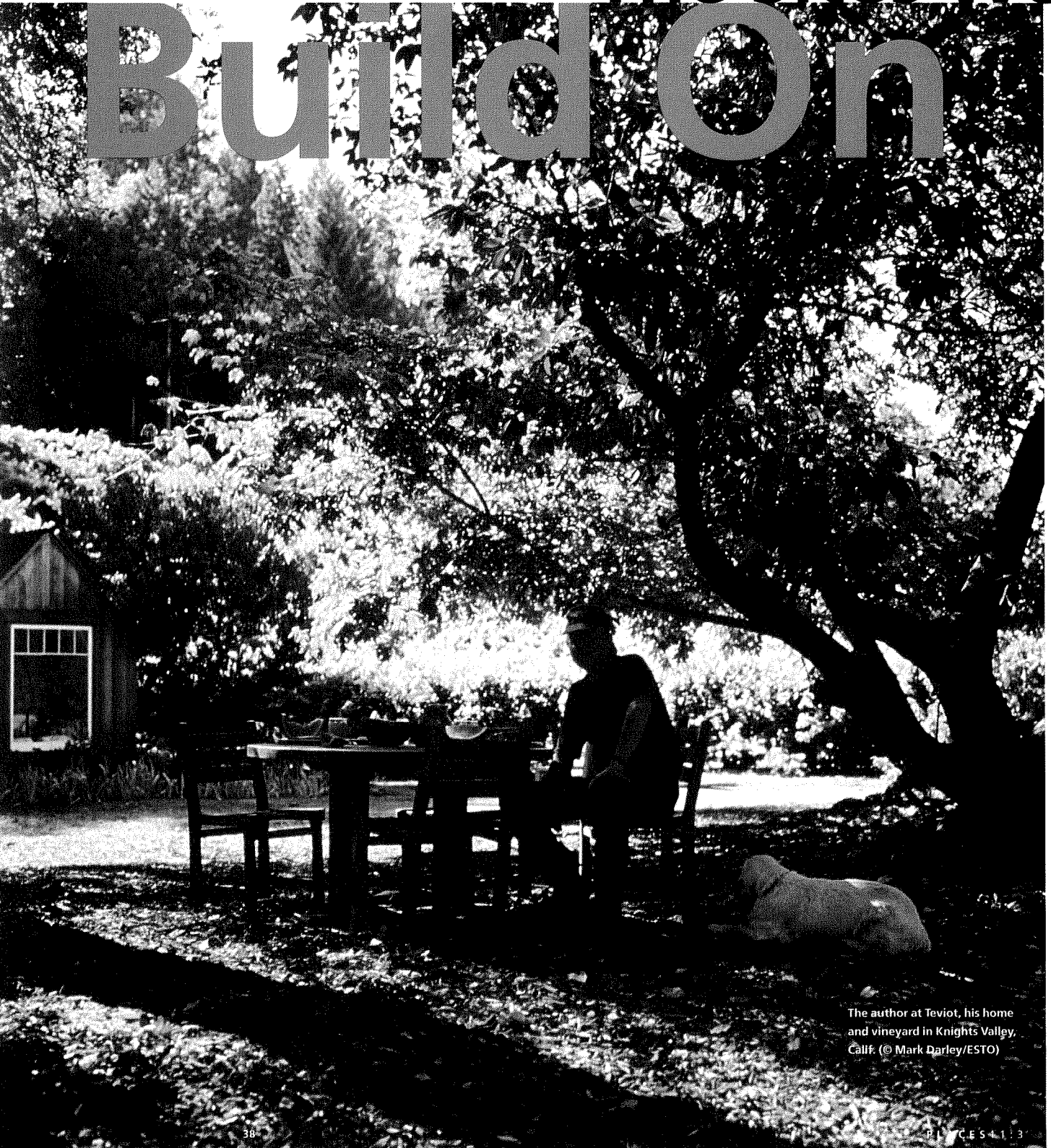
1998-01-15

Peer reviewed

William Turnbull, Jr.

The Sites We

Build On

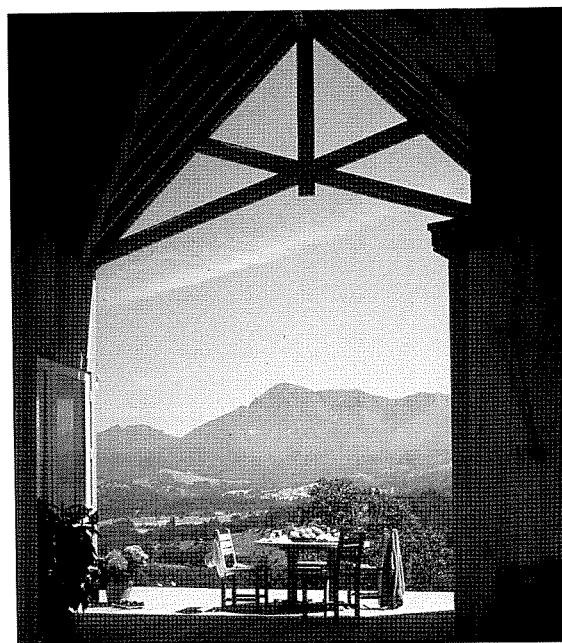


The author at Teviot, his home and vineyard in Knights Valley, Calif. (© Mark Darley/ESTO)

DEAR DONLYN

I am writing in response to your kind invitation to comment on “Images that Motivate,” the legacy of Charles W. Moore. In my zeal to uncover a compelling answer, by literally digging in my garden I have managed to throw my back in a painful fashion and have been grounded by my doctor. “Grounded,” of course is a good image in itself for me, but not one I had wished to prevent my presence at the symposium.

Thinking about this particular chapter in *Chambers for a Memory Place*, it seems to me that the last project I did with Charles and Arthur Andersson was indeed a chocolate sundae or, more specifically, a whole table full of them. The variety of buildings, from gymnasium to astral space to art museum, all with attendant residences, added up to complex with a level of complexity that rivaled the college campuses we all have been involved with. After working on the project for years, I found myself suffering the inevitable malady that comes from over-indulging in rich foods and I began to yearn for more simple fare, perhaps mashed potatoes?



Above: High Ridge Ranch, Sonoma, Calif. (Christopher Irion)

Left: Teviot, Knights Valley, Calif. (© Mark Darley/ESTO)

Kitchen, Teviot, Knights Valley,
Calif. (© Mark Darley/Esto)



Looking back, the 1980s in general seemed to be a time of surfeit. The Mountain View Civic Center and Arts Complex, which was a competition we actually won from Charles, is another example of excessive form. The site plan, with its three inter-related courtyards is the best part, relating from the busy commercial street through to the quiet green park adjoining the library. The building committee, under the spell of Michael Graves, held us too closely to historical forms and Mediterranean colors, and the quality of the internal space and light are not sufficient to overcome the stylistic excesses.

The Foothill dormitories at University of California, Berkeley, also tried to solve too many problems in too limited a space with too little money. The building has its moments, as in the marker towers for the dining complex and the wonderful resolution of frustration when the earthquake fault setback line was moved, yet again, during working drawings and we reacted by just slicing an arc out of the building and celebrating the cut with red paint and battens. These were small moments of pleasure in the frenzy of deadlines and committee demands.

By the 1990s, I yearned for what Dan Gregory, the California architectural historian, calls the complex problem of simplicity. The church that my wife Mary and I did for St. Andrew Presbyterian in the Sonoma Valley begins to achieve the serenity of place and circumstance that is fundamental to quality architecture. The little caretaker's house on the Swift Property in Franz Valley, nestled in among century-old oak trees, also accomplishes this. Both projects talk about land and landscapes as motivators.

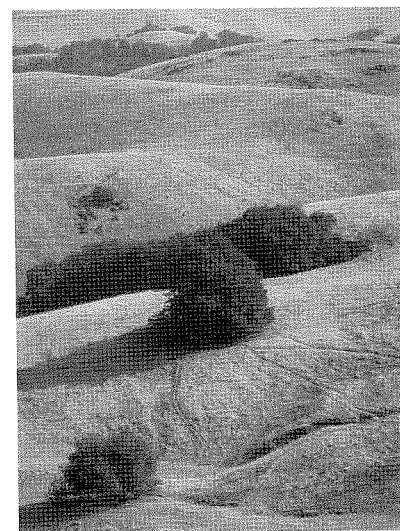
It occurs to me now when we talk about images that motivate, mine are not abstract or metaphorical but overwhelmingly concrete and tangible. They are the sites I build on, which are always distinct one from another. The shape of the ground,

the view, the quality and type of tree cover, the sun and the wind all have voices that I listen to and learn from.

Our own little house complex in our vineyard in Knights Valley gives me incredible pleasure in this way. Sited under the wind protection of the heavily forested hillside, it is a very simple composition dominated by 60-foot-square lawn. The stone retaining wall at the seat level establishes the grass plane and the gentle rise to the stand of trees across from the way creates a declivity in the rolling landscape that becomes a place that the tiny buildings celebrate as home. The wood we used to frame the structures was milled from trees on the property that were felled by the wind, so the houses are a rebirth of the landscape in the architectural form. All the sheltering roof construction is exposed and the act of shelter takes on a visual importance, as it did at the condominium so many years ago.

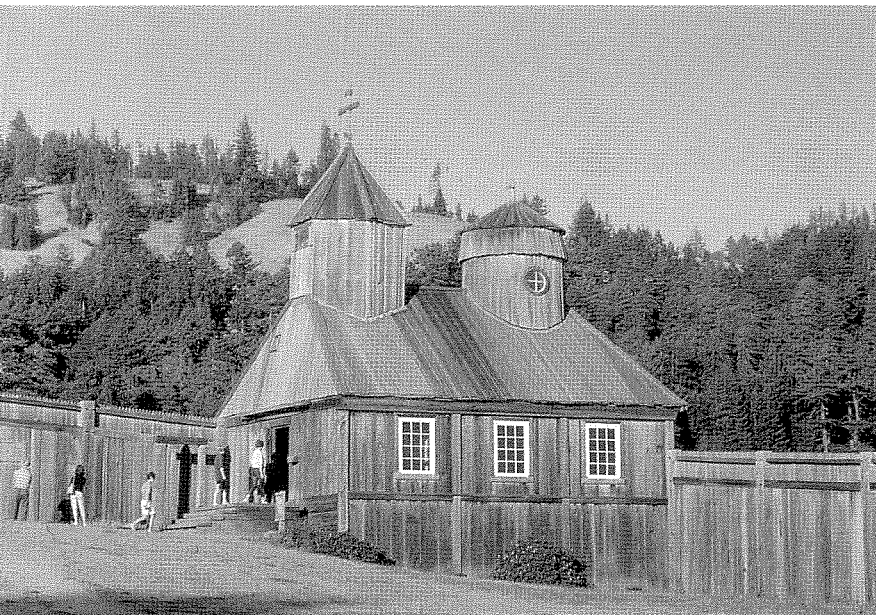
There is no excess here. The dog trot divides the functional spaces of the house and converts into a porch with sliding doors to invite or deflect the wind. It becomes a place to eat, a winter mud room and a place where the dogs sleep. In the old words of Jean Labatut: "The maximum effect with the minimum of means."

This interest in where we build leads onwards into interests of how we build. Maybe this is the great circle route to Princeton and the lessons of Louis Kahn. We are now finishing off a new winery now made of pisé, which is cement mixed with earth and sprayed like gunite against steel reinforcing rods and form boards. There is an elemental pleasure that comes from making a building from the very ground you walk on. Another interesting building, which has yet to start construction, is a straw-bale studio whose building bricks are bales from the Central Valley rice fields. (I'll bet when Kahn asked what brick wanted to be, he never thought of rice straw!) Recycling



Above: Teviot, Knights Valley, Calif. (© Mark Darley/Esto)
Right: Northern California hills. (William Turnbull, Jr.)
Below: Dog trot, Teviot, Knights Valley, Calif. (© Mark Darley/Esto)





Fort Ross chapel, Fort Ross, Calif. (William Turnbull, Jr.)

waste materials to shape usable spaces seems wonderfully basic and emotionally rewarding.

Charles talks about the maturing, or aging, architect's conundrum of whether to focus energy on limited fields of endeavor or cast a wider net. As I build more, I really want to build less, but invest in those structures a special spirit that resonates with the user, visitor or inhabitant.

You asked at the beginning for images that motivate; I stumbled across an image that surprised me. That image is of the marriage ceremony: two entities coming together to make a new whole. In a way, this is how I perceive architecture, especially the good architecture of the vernacular, which deals with common sense and the satisfaction of needs, both physical and emotional, and marries the land with the thoughtfulness and craftsmanship of the architect—builder for the use and pleasure of the inhabitants.

You talk about creating places that have the qualities of deep history, exhilarating presences, fundamental lawfulness, cyclical change, sparkling light and infinitely surprising detail. That image describes the cove by Condominium 9 at the Sea Ranch, but it could equally describe a Shaker community—such as New Ephram, Pennsylvania. Marry the two and you have a timeless record of human inhabitation respecting the natural world.

As I drive through our landscapes, the places that lift my soul and delight my eye give me a motivating imagery for tomorrow's complicated demands. May I have the wisdom to follow the star of simplicity, respect the geodes and chocolate sundaes of complexity, and enjoy making my landscapes in garlic mashed potatoes and gravy.

— BILL



Wedding pavilion, Teviot,
Knights Valley, Calif.
(© Mark Darley/Esto)