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Clare Cooper Marcus

# Environmental Autobiography

The Australian novelist, David Malouf, has written: “First houses are the grounds of our first experience. Crawling about at floor level, room by room, we discover laws that we will apply later in the world at large; and who is to say if our notions of space and dimension are not determined for all time by what we encounter there...” For most of us, I would venture, it was in the environments of childhood that the person we are today began to take shape.

As a Berkeley student in the ‘60s, during that heady time of self-exploration, it became clear to me that my concern for the poverty of children’s environments in the city stemmed from my own quite opposite experience—a free-range childhood in the English countryside. It seemed likely that for most people, as they change and grow throughout their lives, their psychological development is punctuated not only by significant relationships with people, but close affective ties with a succession of physical environments, beginning in childhood. As I began to teach in the College of Environmental Design it occurred to me that students of landscape architecture and architecture might benefit from exploring their own earlier years to uncover those personal environmental experiences—positive and negative—that had shaped their values. With this in mind, I started to craft an assignment that became known as the environmental autobiography.

The exploration began in the classroom. I asked the group to close their eyes and then took them on a guided meditation back to a favorite childhood place. In their imaginations, they explored its shape, its colors, its boundaries; who or what was there with them; what they could smell, hear, see; what they did in this place. I deliberately used the word “place” in order to suggest a setting not necessarily indoor or outdoor. After about ten minutes I had students open their eyes and in silence, draw this place in any way they wanted—a diagram, a map, a perspective—with words added as they liked, or not. This was done on butcher paper with Crayola crayons, the latter deliberately chosen to simulate a child’s drawing, rather than any fine, architectural rendering. Finally, when all had pinned their drawings on the wall, volunteers described their favorite place to the whole class. I always did the exercise too, alongside the students. For myself, it nearly always turned out to be the same place—the woods where my brother and I built a secret “hut” near our house in the country after we were evacuated from London in the blitz of the second World War.

Having students introduce themselves via their favorite place was a wonderful, non-threatening beginning to a class – no one or their place could be judged as right or wrong. Everyone thereafter remembered Joe for his hide-out in a ditch in New Jersey, or Nancy for her secret place in the California sand dunes. Few people had trouble recalling some kind of secret place they found or made.

I remember that for a young landscape architecture student it was a tumble-down shack he and friend discovered. “About half the wall boards and most of the roof were missing. It was totally surrounded by lush greenery, much of which extended inside through the missing wall planks. It really seemed to be out in the jungle. In reality, it was only thirty feet or less from an asphalt path...My friend and I had a code word for it. We called it ‘The Palace’. This word was part of a large

code we designed to speak secretly about going to this place to smoke cigarettes.”

Such places recalled nostalgically were frequently outside the home, but a few recalled spaces *inside*. These were more likely to be those by people who had grown up in a high rise, or by women who, as girls in the 1950s, as now, had less territorial freedom than boys. A young architecture student recalled her special place. “The walk-in closet in the bedroom was my favorite hideaway. It had doors that could be opened from the inside and outside and a light within. The closet was large enough for three people to fit in, but I often liked to close the doors and lock myself in to play house or read books.”

Sometimes it was not a person-made space that was rediscovered or claimed but a particularly evocative natural setting—a creek at the back of a Berkeley house, or a grassy bank beside a ravine in Newport Beach. “I can remember the rich smell of salt and warm sun intensifying the smell of the grass. The smell to most people was offensive—stagnant water—but to us it was paradise because it was ‘ours’.” Many of the childhood memories evoked by this exercise reflected the first yearnings to create a place to be *private*, to fashion *personal space*, and to play at *adult roles*. Research has shown that this tendency to want to create a private place in the middle years of childhood (5 to 11 years) is true cross-culturally and does not necessarily indicate a drive to become designers as adults.

After this initial drawing exercise in the classroom, I asked students to spend the next three weeks writing their environmental autobiography by first, describing the place they had drawn in class, then describing every environment up to the present that still had a “charge” for them—that is, it still evoked positive or negative memories—and that they were willing to write about. Then again in class, I asked students to draw and describe their Ideal Environment, say, five years hence when they



were no longer students and embarked on their career. This experience often evoked a spirited discussion when some landscape architecture students, for example, saw their ideal as a semi-wilderness setting with no other houses in sight. This provoked questions such as “How will you get to work?” “Is this an environmentally responsible way to live when you have to drive everywhere?” Or some architecture students, who tended to favor urban living, saw themselves five years hence in futuristic buildings of their own design.

Having completed this more subjective part of the paper, I asked students to look more objectively at what they had written and try to answer the following questions: Do you discern any connections between these past environmental experiences and your decision to enter a design field? In your studio work so far, do you see any repeated patterns that have some connection to a past environment? Do you see any connection between your ideal environment and what you would like to design for others?

At first, as a teacher, I found this paper difficult to grade. I gave a higher grade to someone who, for example, had lived in several countries or exotic environments, over someone who had spent their entire life in the same suburban house. Quickly I saw this was not right, and from then on, students were graded as Satisfactory (if they completed the assignment) or Unsatisfactory (if they did not). In twenty-five years of teaching, and the hundreds of students in my classes, I don't remember one who received an Unsatisfactory grade. Indeed, over the years, and meeting students again long after my retirement, many have told me this was one of the most important assignments in their whole career, and the only paper from their college years they had kept. I remember one student who came to pick up his paper at my Wurster Hall office saying: “This is the first time in my whole student experience that anyone has said my life is of any consequence.”

Why did this assignment touch so many students? Academic life tends to emphasize an objective stance, except perhaps in psychology. Certainly when I was teaching environmental design there was rarely any connection made between a student's background and environmental experiences, and their choice of a career. Some landscape architecture students recognized that their choice of this field was prompted in part by their sadness or anger at a favorite childhood place (woods, fields, vacant land) being demolished for a suburban subdivision or shopping mall. Some students found a startling connection between a favorite childhood place and a repeated pattern in their studio work. A young architecture student from Taiwan, for example, remembered a diagonal path from a gate to a favorite grandfather's house. She was startled to realize that she often repeated this formal motif in her studio designs. Another student recalled the importance of an attic space in her childhood and an "attic theme" re-appearing in her design work. My advice to students was that there is nothing right or wrong in these revelations, but that, just as a psychologist needs to understand their own emotional makeup so as not to "dump it on their clients, so must a designer be aware of their biases and values so as not to impose them inappropriately on the places they create, or the clients they work with. It would be inappropriate, for example, for an architect to constantly repeat a spatial motif stemming from a favorite childhood place when designing houses for private clients who may have quite different aesthetic preferences, or a housing project for clients who have little direct input into the design.

*" What was extraordinary about this experience was that, despite all that we knew by this time about our own biases and values, most still ended up creating a house for their client imbued with their own—not the client's—preferences. "*

What did I learn as a teacher and researcher? While reading hundreds of these papers, it stood out that the favorite childhood place was usually one experienced between the ages of approximately five and eleven, and for the great majority that place was outdoors; it often involved some manipulation of the setting to make a house, den, clubhouse etc.; and it was frequently in a semi-secret location which adults did not know about. This conforms to what we know from empirical research on childhood environments that in many cultures, the period of childhood between five and eleven spans those years when children are allowed some freedom of exploration on their own, and before the onset of puberty. This period is characterized by children learning about the world—and themselves—by exploring and manipulating the “stuff of the world,” whether it is pushing leaves around to simulate the rooms of a house, or draping a sheet between chairs to create a hiding place.

In the classroom discussions with my students, we looked at the fact that few children nowadays have access to leftover, secret places where they can manipulate the environment, and most spend their days either in a classroom, in front of the computer, or in an asphalt schoolyard. I introduced students to the Greening the Schoolyard movement, school gardens, kindergartens in Germany, Scandinavia and now a few in North America where children spend the whole day, whatever the weather, outdoors. We considered people’s ideal environments (their own and those of the general population) and discussed the environmental implications of preferences for suburban single-family homes, large lots, car-oriented subdivisions. We discussed walkable neighborhoods, New Urbanism, public transit, the return to the city. In short, this assignment not only opened students’ eyes to their own environmental experiences, values and biases, but also lead to discussions of the extent to which these values were shared, and the broader implications for society.

This was just one of the assignments in a large undergraduate and graduate class that I taught from 1969–1994. This class was always



taught in the fall semester and the first assignment was to compare and contrast human behavior in two office district plazas in downtown San Francisco, in order to suggest re-design programs that would enhance their use. A second assignment involved a quite detailed post-occupancy evaluation of an urban park selected by the student, using activity mapping, behavior traces, and interviews, culminating again, where appropriate, in a re-design. The environmental autobiography was the third and last assignment, scheduled in November to December when the weather was less favorable for fieldwork. I reassured students that they didn't have to use the library or go outside, but could just sit in front of the fire and reflect.

Somewhere in the early 1970s, I added another course—"Personal Values in Design"—limited to ten graduate students where the environmental autobiography became the sole focus of the class. We met one evening a week in a different student's home, and each week drew and discussed remembered environments from different periods of life—childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, the current home—discussed our Ideal Environments, all the while keeping journals of personal insights. In the last class, we met one weekend at China Beach in San Francisco where there was ample flotsam and jetsam. We exchanged journals and each "constructed a house" for the "client" whose journal we had read. What was extraordinary about this experience was that, despite all that we knew by this time about our own biases and values, most still ended up creating a house for their client imbued with their own—not the client's—preferences. Incidentally, I never fully described this class in the official catalog since I suspected some senior faculty members at the time would consider it too "touchy-feely." I let students seek me out. For some, it was a life-changing experience including one who could not decide between a career in architecture or journalism, and ended up as an architectural writer; another student's interests morphed from architecture into a successful career in furniture design.

Over the years, I spoke about the environmental autobiography at conferences, especially those of the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA), and found, surprisingly, that more or less the same assignment had been developed at the same time as a teaching tool by at least two other colleagues: Randy Hester at North Carolina State University, and Kenneth Helphand at the University of Oregon, unbeknownst to each other. Other people started using the assignment and we would meet at EDRA conferences to discuss the pros and cons, and ways of improving students' understanding. I recently met up with Moura Quayle, a student who was at Berkeley in the early 80s, who became a professor at the University of British Columbia. She introduced this assignment to her students there, and, according to her, it is now used all over Canada by her students who themselves became teachers. In my experience, I have only come across one academic who stopped using this assignment due to its effects on her students. This was a professor in psychology who found that remembered childhood places were too often settings of early abuse and the assignment was too upsetting.

Later in my career, I used a variant of this approach in the research that culminated in the book *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home* (Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1994). In this work I interviewed many people about their relationships to their current home. I would often ask people to tell me about their childhood home, and frequently this revealed some connection to their feelings—positive or negative—about their current home. Over the years, I have heard from professionals, mostly psychologists, though some designers too, who have adopted the methods used in this book to work with clients who need guidance regarding the design or renovation of their homes. Toby Israel in her book, *Some Place Like Home; Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places*, used the environmental autobiography approach

to explore how childhood environmental experiences influenced the later design work of several famous contemporary architects, including Michael Graves, Andres Duany, and Charles Jencks.

My own environmental experiences and how they have shaped my life are explored in my books *House as a Mirror of Self*, and in *Iona Dreaming: The Healing Power of Place – A Memoir* (Lake Worth FL: Nicolas-Hays inc., 2010). It has become clear to me over the years that the pivotal childhood experience of evacuation from London to the countryside during World War Two, and my finding solace in nature during a time of national disruption and familial dysfunction imprinted me profoundly. It is not surprising that I ended up teaching in landscape architecture (though I also held a joint appointment in architecture), and that in the years since retirement from full time teaching, my focus has been on research and consulting regarding the healing power of nature in healthcare—hospitals, senior facilities, hospice, Alzheimer’s facilities etc. This work has resulted in two books co-authored with former Berkeley landscape architecture graduates—Clare Cooper Marcus and Marni Barnes, *Healing Gardens: Therapeutic Benefits and Design Recommendation* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1999) and Clare Cooper Marcus and Naomi Sachs, *Therapeutic Landscapes: An Evidence-based Approach to Designing Healing Gardens and Restorative Outdoor Spaces* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2013). For me, personally, the profound importance of nature in the middle-childhood years has reverberated throughout my life—from a lifelong passion for gardening; undergraduate studies in historical geography around how humans have shaped the landscape and been shaped by it; to an emphasis during graduate studies at Berkeley on outdoor space in housing projects; and even to teaching in landscape architecture, even though I have no degree in that subject; to my current work on the healing power of nature in the often stressful environments

of healthcare. The writer Graham Greene wisely observed: “There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in”. While it is by no means necessary that everyone tease out the reasons why their life followed a certain path, I believe such exploration enriches self-awareness and helps us understand how our lives can be of service in the world.

Clare Cooper Marcus is Professor Emerita in the departments of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, University of California, Berkeley and is internationally recognized for her research on the social, and psychological implications of design. She has published numerous articles, is the recipient of many awards, and has authored/co-authored seven books including *Housing as if People Mattered* (1986), *People Places* (1990), *House as a Mirror of Self* (1995), *Healing Gardens* (1999), *Iona Dreaming: The Healing Power of Place - A Memoir* (2010), and *Therapeutic Landscapes* (2013).

[Chapter figures provided by author.]

