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Paths: The Nature of Linear Public Space

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When we move from one place to another we do so along a path. In this sense a path is simply a route that we follow, whatever its visual, kinesthetic, or psychological character. However a “path,” as either an idea or a physical space, can be a profound experience of movement and place. Paths are full of the deep mythological potential of seeking, adventure and transformation. Some paths are processional, leading to important civic or sacred destinations. Some are circumstantial, casually providing passage between two places. Still others are conceptual, drawing the mind where the body cannot go.

Paths provide an opportunity in our destination-oriented world to engage our bodies and minds in the space between — both the space between origin and destination and the space between the edges of the path itself.

Origins and Destinations

The conscious establishment of a path implies a connection between two places. Sometimes the relationship between the two ends of the path is hierarchical. On a path to a sacred site, for instance, one end is the entry or origin and the other the sacred destination. Sometimes, on the other hand, the relationship between the two ends

is relatively equal, as it is in a path between two public spaces in a city.

In a hierarchical situation, a path provides not only a functional connection to the destination but also an opportunity to prepare for reaching it. If the destination is religious, the path often symbolizes or condenses a spiritual and physical pilgrimage. Sometimes the path can serve as the actual location for linear devotionals. For example, the Stations of the Cross are strung along the path to pilgrimage churches allowing the pilgrims to relive the passion of Christ.

At Borobudur, a temple in Java, the circumambulatory path to the top depicts the life and enlightenment of Buddha, at first with great visual intensity, then with growing serenity. At the top the pilgrim emerges into a world of elegant spareness, the achievement of emptiness. As with most hilltop temples and churches, the physical exertion required to reach the top of Borobudur is demanding. The body registers the spiritual journey in the strain of the muscles.

Most paths we travel in our everyday lives are much less designed. They are a result of casual movement to and from not-necessarily-linked places. The destinations reached in these circumstances are not usually related by hierarchy. The paths, often simply the

sidewalk along a street, are event-filled spaces occupied by cafes, homeless people, newsstands, and mailboxes and are interrupted by the frequent streets that cut perpendicular to movement. In less urban settings our paths may consist of moving from our cars across expanses of asphalt to a building.

These are the profane paths of our daily lives. When thought of in context of the richly textured paths of gardens and sacred places, these paths disappoint us. They could be better if they were thought of as spaces in-between; spaces that deserve particular attention. The lessons of the paths that engage our bodies and our minds can help us think about all paths.

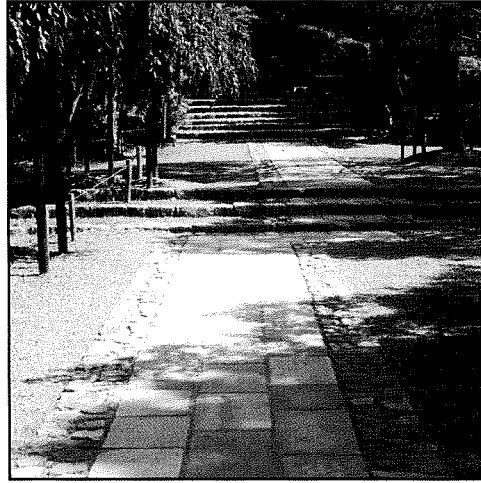
Gates

Paths often begin and end with gates. Gates usually exist perpendicular to the path, presenting us with a thickness to penetrate, a pause before beginning or continuing the path. They mark entry into another realm, the world of the path itself. They separate inside from outside and sacred from profane. Gates stand as sentries to the path — guarding, celebrating, or drawing attention to the acts of arrival and departure.

A gate might be as simple as a pair of uprights, such as pylons, that are significantly different from the edges

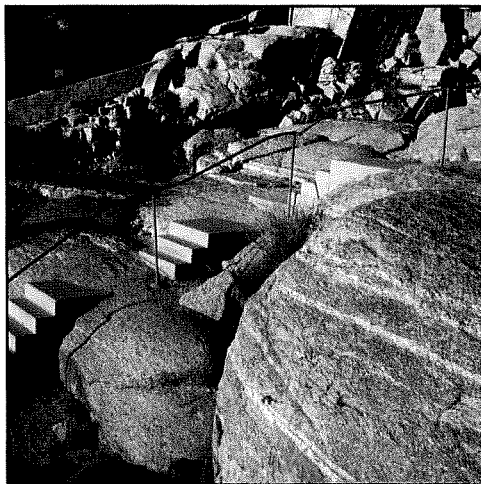


the mind where the body cannot go.

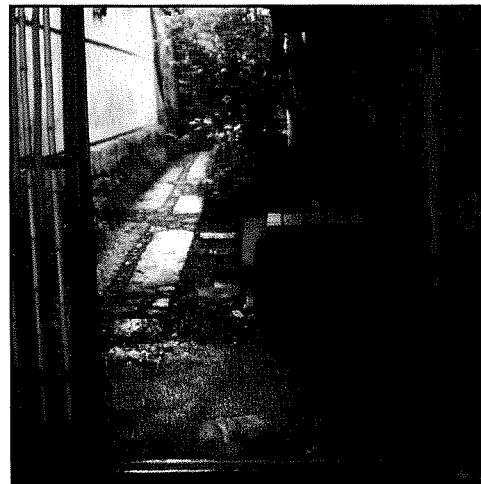


Paths provide an opportunity in a destination-oriented

world to engage our bodies in the space between.



Still others are conceptual, drawing



of the path itself yet not enclosing. Gates might exist sequentially along a path, marking the different realms that intersect the path between each set of gates. When gates are layered they create an experience of progressing into a place that is more and more protected, and, perhaps, less and less public.

A gate with the potential to be closed may also form a barrier. It can close off the world of the path or the worlds at the destination of the path. A closable gate can create a mystery by revealing only part of the world beyond. Such a gate obviously guards something of value.

Demarcation: Surfaces, Boundaries, and Enclosure

The word “path” evokes the image of the earth laid bare and smoothed by the passage of many feet. Indeed, the simplest way to mark a path is through a change of materials upon the ground. In general, a path’s surface materials should make walking along it more desirable and comfortable than walking somewhere else.

There is a perceived space along a path. It is the space that is implied as we project our minds to the place where our bodies will soon be as we

move along the path. The path guides us, directing us by leading the way. The path does not need to be continuous; it may start and stop, providing a dotted line to follow. Sometimes this space is partially enclosed, making it more tangible.

Opposite page: Pedestrian street in Guanajuato, Mexico.
 Clockwise from top left: Path at Fushimi-Inari Shrine near Kyoto; Ryonji, Kyoto, path through grounds; Ryokan Iwanami, Kyoto, gate; steps up a rock formation, U.S.
 All photos by Lisa R. Findley.

Paths that are bounded vertically on each side create a strong perception of spatial definition and character because of the way that our bodies relate to vertical edges. The edges might be tall, solid walls, or they might be implied by a series of columns, a low wall, or a balustrade, allowing views beyond the edge and opening up to the sky. The degree of enclosure and the proportions of the bounded space (the width of the path to the height of the enclosing edges) are two factors that influence how we feel on the path.

Also important is how the edges of the space of the path are used. If the path has useful spaces, ones that invite occupation, along its edges, the nature of the path is profoundly affected. If there is no invitation to other uses, the dimensions of a tall, bounded, narrow path, can create a space that seems almost inhuman.

Paths can also be marked and contained by an overhead plane, such as a pergola or canvas sheet. Such a ceiling can be sufficient by itself to imply the path — we simply walk under its sheltering guidance. Proportion is important in this case, too; if the overhead plane is too low, then the sense of enclosure can be oppressive. If the overhead plane is too high, the path might not have strong enough definition.

If many gates are placed together in rapid succession, they begin to form a completely enclosed path — one that is bounded overhead as well as on the sides. This forms all of the possible surfaces to enclose the volume of the space.

A Particular Path

These lessons of paths, lessons of physical making, are not terribly complicated. They simply require careful observation both with the eyes and with the body in space and time.

The pilgrimage path to the hilltop temple in Mandalay, Burma, provides a grand, shaded approach. The path itself is made out of concrete, incorporating stairs and wide places to stop and rest during the climb. As one climbs up the hill in the tropical heat, the slight breeze through these shaded places is welcome.

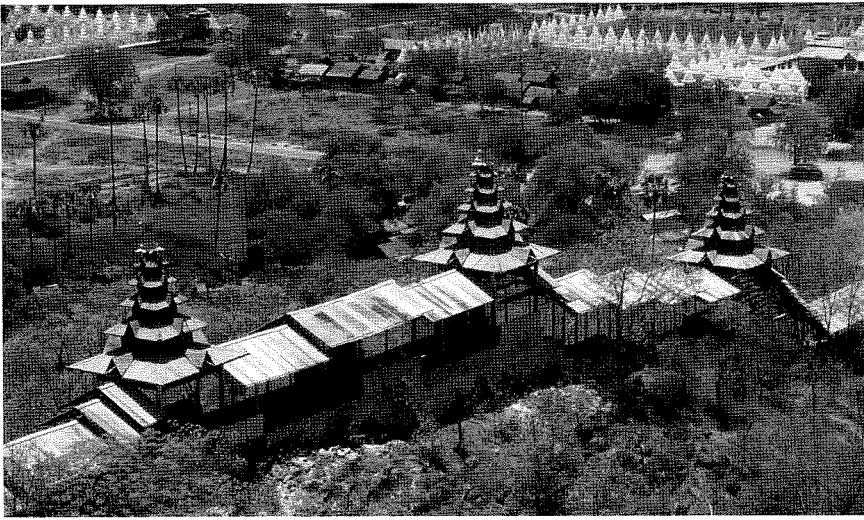
The path moves up the hill in a straight line, turning as it needs to, always at right angles, in counterpoint to the steep, scrub-covered hillside. Low, rubble-stone balustrades provide edges along the path and widen to become benches at the resting places.

The roof above the path is made of corrugated tin mounted on a light steel

frame. It responds to the conditions of the path underneath it, changing level with the steepness of the rise of the stairs. Spaces between the roof pieces are left open, allowing for ventilation of the tropical heat. The resting places are marked by stacked, pagoda-like roofs. Their shape reminds us of a sacred structure, but their materials are inexpensive and common.

Upon arriving at the temple at the top, one is hot and exhausted from the climb. But one is confronted by a standing Buddha, whose outstretched hand points back out to the city, down the long covered stair and away from the sacred center of the hill.





Opposite page: Along the path to the hilltop temple, Mandalay, Burma
Below: Approaching the temple.
Right: Buddha in the temple.
Above: Looking back down the path.

