

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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# Letter One, 10.11.05

Nicholas Howe



Dear Donlyn,

I was at Notre Dame last week to give a lecture about early medieval England: surviving buildings and landscapes, patterns of use and reuse, Iron Age earthworks and Roman *spolia*, later additions to Anglo-Saxon churches, and the like. In the midst of it, to escape the overly planned campus of the university, I spent some time wandering around downtown South Bend. It's the classic dying downtown of a once prosperous American industrial town. It has its monuments to that past prosperity: a 1920s Art Deco fortress of a bank building that still has elevator operators; a twelve-story office

tower, thin and elegant as a knife blade, from the same era, with an architect's office on its top floor, like an aerie. Buildings built with a sense of their place in the world, but now forlorn in their under-use. On the south edge of town, stretching like a protective city wall, is the abandoned Studebaker works—a five- or six-story brick factory that makes the horizontal as powerful and dynamic as the vertical thrust of a great skyscraper.

From a distance, amid this scene of faded emptiness, I saw an orange-red brick building. It had a car dealer's lot on one side, and on the other a minor league ballpark with the Studebaker works looming

over it. The building caught my eye, though, because it looked like nothing so much as one of the small brick churches from the nineteenth century that one sees dotted around rural Ohio and Indiana. This one had a SOLD sign on it, and that was obviously its reprieve from the wrecker's bulldozer.

As I got closer, I saw that it was not a church but a synagogue. It had a Star of David on each of its two gables and a Hebrew inscription on its facade. Its cornerstone read 1901. It hadn't been used as *shul* since the early 1990s, said the man I found inside it, the father of the man who had bought it to restore it for his own house. He was a remodeling contrac-

tor and planned to keep many of the interior elements, such as the great chandelier, the women's balcony, and, most prominently, the white-and-gold ark for the Torah scrolls. A sacrilege, perhaps, but better than tearing down the synagogue, as the adjoining neighborhood of workers' housing had been leveled for the ball-park.

It's the saving unlikelihood of this moment that enchants me and keeps me looking as I wander around. A few days spent in a grand Catholic university leads me to this humble, working-class Orthodox synagogue. A city that once built the most stylishly modernistic of American cars (and you see that same style in those downtown buildings) leads me to a house of worship that in the cornfields of northwest Ohio would have been a Protestant chapel—such as the one that remains, boarded up but still beautifully chaste, in a tiny town called Neptune.

This, for me, is the life of places: their moments of unlikelihood that register far deeper in the human memory and imagination than any planned site can do, especially any site that offers a po-mo gesture to the past with a knowing wink-and-nod of stylistic allusion. These moments are saving in some literal sense because they preserve the structure and fabric of those who have been there before us; but saving also in the sense of redeeming our own places. This kind of saving isn't about historical preservation (that's a different issue); it's about the ways we live in and move through spaces/places that don't add up neatly, that keep surprising us with glimpses of the sometimes beautiful, the often haunting, and the stubbornly present.

— Nick



*Nicholas Howe, whose wonderful book Across an Inland Sea: Writing in Place from Buffalo to Berlin (2003) sets a fine standard for writing about place, passed away September 27. Nick and I had conceived a book consisting of letters we would send to each other about places that we visited. Quick on his feet, he sent me the following letter as the first in the series. In it, he gathers thoughts into the folding embrace of close observation, even as he*

*leads our minds to reach far. We publish it here to remember him, to ask more of ourselves, and to inspire others.*

— Donlyn Lyndon

**Above and Opposite:** Old synagogue in South Bend, Indiana. Photos by author.