

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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Re: Reading [Forming Place, Informing Practice]

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I see the *reading* of architecture and urban form as integral to the practice of place making. I call this essay “Re: Reading” but also mean to imply *re-reading* in the belief that repeated *readings* will yield deeper meaning in both design and comprehension.

As I view the design process, there is a cycle of reading and conjecture, which repeats until there is some degree of stability achieved in the mind. At that point, one no longer senses the need to continue to re-read the situation, or, for that matter, to offer additional conjectures.

Because this formulation juxtaposes reflection and action, and especially because it acknowledges that the conception of place grows out of active and personal engagement, I am hopeful that it may suggest ways of bridging the gap between forming place and informing practice.

The idea of *reading* has a long legacy and has been defined and refined by extraordinary people over many years.<sup>1</sup> Giancarlo De Carlo suggests that effective reading requires purpose, a designing frame of mind and, probably, having designs in mind, however tentative they may be. Moreover, reading has values embedded, both conscious and unconscious.

Reading requires a deep engagement of two sorts, one in some sense contained within the other, and both used over and over again. These are *engagement in the locale* and *engagement in the context*.

#### Engagement in the Locale

*Engagement in the locale* is bodily, affective and intellectual, drawing deeply and widely on the faculties of the individual. It is an active, not passive, process. I see it happening in more or less the following manner.

There is a tendency activated in you that requires you to respond in some way. That tendency may be immediately resolved, or, failing that, it may arouse affect and possibly force the intellect as well back into the process. If there is still a lack of resolution, it may cause you to attempt an imaginative excursion in order to close the gap.

I am leaning here heavily on Leonard Meyer’s *Emotion and Meaning in Music*,<sup>2</sup> in which Meyer clearly describes how to experience an artistic artifact. He quotes logician Morris R. Cohen to set the parameters of the definition of *meaning*: “anything acquires meaning if it is connected with or indicates or refers to

something beyond itself, so that its full nature points to and is revealed in that connection.” Therefore, meaning has to do with an object, it has to do with that to which the object refers, and it has to do with a conscious observer who perceives the nature of each and the connections between them.

If that to which the object refers is distant and different, the meaning is, in Meyer’s term, *designative*. Many architectural quotations contained in contemporary buildings are primarily designative in meaning, having little other effect on the observer. Too often in writings about architecture, meaning has been associated with designative meaning alone.

If that to which the object refers is the same as itself, the meaning is what Meyer terms *embodied*. “The dawn heralds the coming of the day...the same stimulus, the music, activates tendencies, inhibits them, and then provides meaningful and relevant resolutions.” All is contained within the same medium.

Meaning unfolds through cycles of reading and re-reading, through interaction with remembered readings, and through re-readings carried out in the imagination. To continue the musical example, when you hear the first passages of a musical piece, it drastically limits what you expect to hear during subsequent episodes. Meyer terms this *hypothetical meaning*. Once the later episodes occur, then the meaning shifts to *evident meaning*. Meyer calls *determinate* the meaning that is based on the complete hearing of the work and on subsequent reflection, conversation and re-experiencing of the episode in question.

To take an architectural example, if you are aware of the rhythmic placement of columns and notice that two are spaced more widely than the others are, you formulate a question. You create alternative hypotheses — or *hypothetical meaning* — that you can confirm or discredit through further observation.

Once you have looked more closely, you see that the more widely spaced columns announce an entrance or passage, and that they are marked by a deepened lintel



Stairway, Woodland Cemetery, Stockholm  
Photo: William L. Porter

above, further to accentuate the wider spacing (as well as to aid in spanning the increased distance). This is *evident* meaning.

After you have experienced the whole building and the variety of different conditions that building contains, you can revisit the same columns to assess their significance in relationship to other conditions and to the overall experience of the building. This, finally, is *determinate* meaning.

Illustrated above is an example that deals directly with both *embodied* and *designative* meaning, both of which tap the life of the individual. The meditation mound of the Woodland Cemetery, in Stockholm, occurs along a route to the Chapel of the Resurrection. The route is an alternative to the path you would follow if you were bringing a family member to be cremated or buried.

Pay special attention in the image to the stairs that lead up the mound. Notice that the slope changes as you near the top. The length of the tread is held constant, but the height of the riser diminishes. Because your body expects a riser of full height, you put more energy into the step than it can accommodate. This creates a misfit between your experience and bodily motion.

As you approach the top, you almost float, as though you could depart the earth in some way, a rather extra-

ordinary projection of self into another state triggered by meaning embodied in the actual steps themselves. You feel that this is the place where the body is transformed into the spirit, or where the spirit leaves the body and moves toward the sky. You see the mound as transformative: both a source of life (a swelling womb) and a burial place for the body once the spirit has departed. This reading is reinforced by your knowledge of the importance of such mounds in Scandinavia and elsewhere from primitive times.

Because embodied meaning has such a direct connection to the body and psychological processes, it can serve as a platform for a wide range of potential interpretations and associations. In this design, where the embodied meaning has been powerfully coupled to potential designative meanings, the extraordinary impact is shared and there is intersubjective understanding. In buildings that merely refer and that do not forge the link with embodied experience, meaning is far more restrictive, idiosyncratic and trivial.

It seems to me that it is impossible to surface embodied or designative meaning unless you use yourself as a research tool. Unless you are sensitive to your own bodily experience, including your senses of irritation, surprise and anticipation, you cannot tap the riches of the world of expectation. For most people, there is a cloak of conventionality that masks the affect they

might otherwise experience. Many architects are fairly good at casting that cloak aside and at being sensitive to the stimulation and direction that these surprises provide, but it is not easy.

### Contextual Engagement

By *contextual engagement* I mean actively bringing to mind conditions that surround or impinge upon the object of our attention. I wish to focus particularly on the human and social contexts that I believe are becoming urgently more important for practice. Two ways of tapping these contexts are *communication* and *co-construction*. The idea and, certainly, the goal of a shared universe of discourse are commonplace among us. But that goal seems nearly an impossible objective, because we cannot be sure that our own background guarantees accurate communication and shared understanding, however subtly and empathetically we behave.

Because designative meaning is so intimately connected to personal experience, I am particularly interested in embodied meaning, for its own sake, and for its connection to designative meaning. Embodied meaning is so integral to being human as to be legible to most sensitive individuals.

One of my two giants on this topic is Michael Reddy, a linguist who has presented a startling contrast to what he calls the “conduit metaphor” of communication. The conduit metaphor implies that I say something, it turns into a little package that is transported somehow to you; you accept the package and decode it. If there is any problem in communication it is because of either a problem in the transfer or a glitch in one of our versions of the code.

Reddy proposes instead the “toolmaker’s paradigm,” in which people live in very different worlds. Envision a circular territory cut into pie-shaped segments. Your segment may be a rocky grotto; mine a swamp. We cannot see the other’s segment, and we cannot hear one another. At the center is a little machine that rotates. I can put messages into the machine, rotate it, and you can take them out.

Say I just made a tool, a strainer, from my swamp, which I find very useful. I describe it, and I tell you how to

build it. I put my instructions into the machine, and you pick them out in your rocky grotto. Strainers don’t make much sense in your context. You have neither the need nor, quite possibly, the materials to build that tool. Instead you try to make a tool out of your available materials and with your experience. The tool you make represents your understanding of that instruction.

You are in a constant state of constructing meaning. Over time, through a process of passing messages back and forth, understanding will increase concerning the fit between the instructions and the original swamp in which they were generated, and the lack of fit between the original instructions and their application in a new context. Through this constructive process, you and I become increasingly aware of the nature of the other’s environment. And we will gradually build a larger and larger common vocabulary by means of which to increase the depth and subtlety of communication.

The second notion of *contextual engagement* is *co-construction*, strongly linked to the first, *communication*. This is an activity described by Wittgenstein, my second giant on this topic. A builder instructs his apprentice by saying, “bring me a brick.” When, from among other objects, the assistant brings the object identified as a brick to the builder, the instruction stops, the communication is complete and a language is developed.<sup>3</sup> The artifact of the process of communication itself becomes what is meaningful between them. While co-constructing, language has become part of the construction rather than isolated from it.

The implications of *co-construction* for professional behavior contrast with what Don Schön and others have called “technical-rational expertise” in which “the professional holds specialized knowledge in matters of social importance, a knowledge of technique based on systematic understandings of objective phenomena. On the basis of this esoteric knowledge, society allows the professional to exercise social control in the domain of his expertise.”<sup>4</sup>

Co-construction challenges this view of professionalism, and its implication of knowledge as esoteric and authoritative. When working with a diverse client

group, one builds a vocabulary of common terms to refer to a common set of experiences, in order to co-construct a meaningful world.

The expertise necessary to create places does not reside solely in our heads, but resides as well in the knowing use of places by the people themselves, who are participants in it, as well as in its making and its remaking. Criteria by which the presence of co-construction in a situation might be detected are:

1. That there be observations grounded in the personal experiences of individuals. By “grounded” I mean that the observations should be confirmed by that individual as being related to his or her bodily, affective and intellectual experience.
2. That there be plausible accounts of others. These can sometimes be created through the use of narrative or the construction of scenarios, and these in turn depend heavily upon the use of well-developed empathetic skills;
3. That there be plausible conjectures, ideas not present in the situation — similar to tentative design — but strongly related, so as to rationalize and inform what one sees, or to receive and reframe observations previously made. These can take form in metaphors, or associative or lateral thought excursions from the present situation.
4. That there should be intersubjective understandings about the important facets of the situation, including a shared view of which are the valid stakeholders in any design situation.

### Conclusion

I have tried to edit the idea of *reading* and to stress that through repeated re-readings one can begin to break what may otherwise be a self-sealing pattern of professional behavior. I first discussed *engagement in the locale*, stressing the power of a strong foundation of *embodied* meaning both to increase the potential for people to construct their own meanings, relevant to their own lives and experiences, and to increase the likelihood that those meanings will be shared with others.

I then discussed *engaging the context* in two different ways. The first is through *communication*, recognizing that people construct their own worlds out of their own experience and the materials that are available. The second is through *co-construction*, where the constructive activities of designers and others are joined in a shared and creative enterprise. These views challenge how we conceive places as well as how we conceive the processes of their design. I believe that they are essential for designing in a plural world.

### Notes

1. Notable among these is Giancarlo De Carlo, whose deep understanding of urban form, whose provocative buildings, whose writings in *Spazio e Società*, whose extraordinary leadership of the International Laboratory for Architecture and Urban Design (ILAUD), and whose inspiration as teacher and colleague provide a wonderfully durable foundation for further constructions, however fragile they may be.
2. Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: Phoenix Books, University of Chicago Press, 1956).
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and the Brown Books* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, Harper and Row, 1965).
4. “This technical-rational approach, which has analogs in many other professions, contains a particular view of professional knowledge and a complimentary way of framing the professional’s role in relationships with clients. This view of professional knowledge is consistent with the formulation put forward by Everett Hughes, one of the founders of the sociology of professions.” Quoted from Horgen, Joroff, Porter and Schön, *Excellence by Design: Transforming Workplace and Work Practice* (New York: Wiley, 1999).