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The most pressing
challenge for designers
is to learn to see and
think with appropriate
complexity.

In many ways, we are emerging from a period that was governed by simplicities and blunt formulas—expedients that disguise rather than reveal, that fuddle rather than inform. We learn little about the way things are made, about our environment and society, or about the nature of our lives, from places that are conceived so simplistically.

But we are no better served by the scramble of unmediated information that has often been served up by the digital age, by the desire to “let it all hang out.” Selecting and ordering the things we think about, while maintaining links to sources of more developed information, are essential to understanding the world we live in.

Buildings and places can be informative if designers remain alert to what they can fruitfully reveal. Designers must invest the time and imagination required to coordinate the various decisions and processes that create buildings so they construct useful patterns for our consideration, patterns that turn our attention to aspects of the surrounding world that can give us special pleasure, open up new vistas of understanding, or make evident the conditions of human aspiration and endeavor.

In this issue we suggest several ways to do this. The articles in the section *Landscape as Mentor*, which is drawn from a conference at the Charles W. Moore Center for the Study of Place, each address some aspect of the ways in which close study of the landscape can lead to richly and appropriately layered form and sustain a variety of meanings and interpretations.

A second set of articles examines Independence Hall and its environs. George Clafien traces a historical succession of proposals for creating a setting that would evoke and sustain national reverence for this monument to the foundation of our country; most schemes floundered on the shoals of oversimplification. Laurie Olin reveals his process for bringing fresh and inventive form

to Independence Mall, which is a national tourist attraction yet must play an effective and informative role in the public spaces of the city.

Other articles reveal unexpected opportunities in the “leftover” parts of Seattle and in the spaces carved out by transportation infrastructure in the Hell’s Kitchen section of New York. Mitchell Schwarzer, reflecting on the Long Island landscape of his youth, offers evidence of the abiding power of early environmental experience and compelling thoughts about the cultural impulse to smooth over and obliterate difference, both then and now. In this issue’s portfolio of place photographs, Maria Cox shows us the localized landscape variations that transform the abstract patterns of golf, first developed on the moors of Scotland, into places that are transformed by the landscape potential of their regions.

Complexity in itself is not a value; selection is essential. Places must be comprehensible if they are to sustain our attention, nurture individuals and create grounds for common understanding. Places must hold information that is appropriate to the conditions of our encounter with them, offering layers of insight that can be comprehended by different people at different times, when they have varying capacities for engagement. As with music, full-volumed cacophony can stir our souls and grasp the mind, but it’s not all-day, everyday fare.

Embracing the larger landscape, exploring the features, processes and particularities that are part of the places where we build, can temper and guide our designs. Remembering critically the many ways that we and others have lived within our extended landscapes, as well as the multitude of differing conditions that we have known and experienced, can be both an enspiriting source and a timely caution. Discerning intelligence is the only solid foundation for our work.

—Donlyn Lyndon