

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Images that Motivate [Speaking of Places]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9fm739wn>

Journal

Places, 9(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

Authors

Lyndon, Donlyn
Moore, Charles W

Publication Date

1994-01-15

Peer reviewed

Images that Motivate

Donlyn Lyndon, Charles W. Moore

This text is adapted from Chambers for a Memory Palace, by Donlyn Lyndon and Charles W. Moore, which will be published this summer by the MIT Press.

Two images that haunt us are geodes and chocolate sundaes. Geodes are magic stones: rough on the outside, but crystalline within, with sparkling facets around a tiny cavern that the imagination endows with breathtaking dimensions. Geodes have been honored in Russian Easter Eggs and in such buildings as the Alhambra in Granada — rough on the outside, crystalline on the inside. Geodes remind us that the inside of a building doesn't have to be at all like the outside, and that the littlest structure can shelter infinities of space and light.

Dear Don,

One Memory Chamber needs still to be considered: it's tempting to call it the Dream, but more properly modest to speak of Image. Images that Motivate. Architects, like most people, usually have some images they specially cherish: nature like purple mountain majesties or amber waves of grain, or the breadth of the skies (in big sky country) or the mysteries of the forest; or maybe manmade — canyons of steel or the lights of home gleaming through the sycamores.

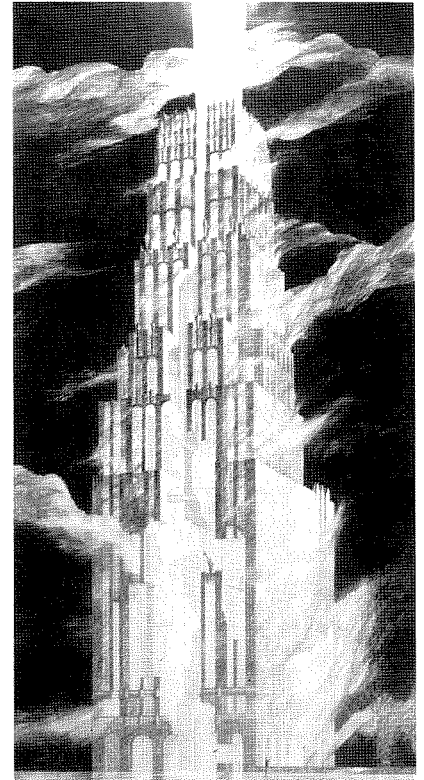
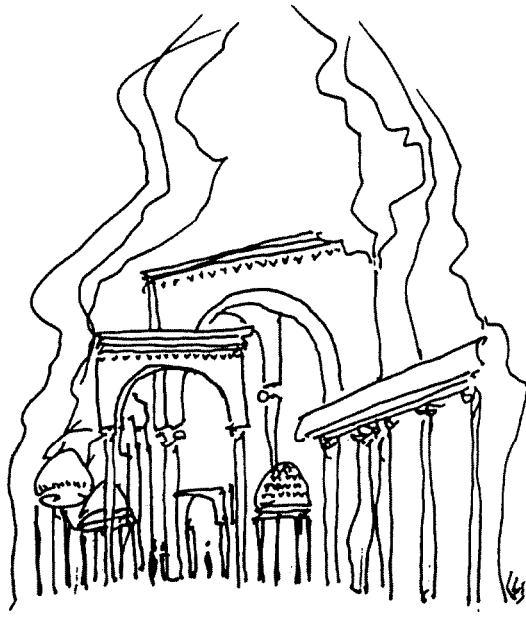
Some architects have special images that give shape to what they would like to design. Le Corbusier had a powerful image of skyscrapers in a park, a vision he espoused so eloquently that whole cities came to be built that way. You and Bill Turnbull had, I thought, a wonderful image of a reef that you

were going to shape of wrecked cars and sink offshore alongside the piece of San Francisco Embarcadero that you made into a concrete waterfront for relaxing. There was the prospect of underwater lights revealing, while they concealed, intimations of a fragment of a lost Atlantis.

I have an image I try sometimes to turn into buildings; you suggested it once or, rather, gave form to it when you pointed out that my designing a building was like eating an ice cream cone on a hot day, licking frenziedly on the drops that threaten to spill. That calls up an image of a building recollecting a chocolate or even hot fudge sundae: The image is a top-heavy one, of course, of roofs and chimneys and dormers and bays all bigger than the chaste and smaller base on which they tumble and slide. A very few medieval buildings, especially in France, do this as they search upward for light. A seaside village, very compact, built in Malta as a movie set for *Popeye*, did it, though it is more like a banana split. But mostly the chocolate sundae is an image for the future: do not confuse it with mashed potatoes which start the same, heaped to overflowing, but then are made centripetal, by a crater filled with gravy. The mashed potato image does not, I think have the generosity or the potential for surprise that good architectural images require.

Left: Geode diagram, by Charles W. Moore.

Right: Chicago Tribune Tower proposal, by Charles W. Moore, John Ruble and Buzz Yudell, from *Late Entries to the Chicago Tribune Tower Competition*. Courtesy Moore Ruble Yudell.



Another image that has for a long time been exciting for me is the geode. Geodes are magic stones rough on the outside but with a crystalline cavern within, with sparkling facets around a tiny space that the imagination endows with breathtaking dimensions. The same magic is found within Russian Easter eggs and in a few buildings, especially the Alhambra in Granada, a rough stone fortress on the outside, with symmetrical gatherings of spaces inside around courtyards of delicate crystalline complexity, some tiled, some made of thousands of plaster shards painted and bathed in light reflected from the surface of splashing fountains.

A gentler geode image is found in canyons or narrow valleys. C. S. Lewis in *Out of the Silent Planet* imagined the inhospitable surface of Mars to be crossed with deep defiles which held enough oxygen to sustain life. Oak trees grow, like the Martians, in little canyons on the California grassy slopes where there is some extra surface water. The sculptor Charles Simon set miniature valleys into the mortar joints of urban walls, suggesting a scale of imagined landscapes within the much

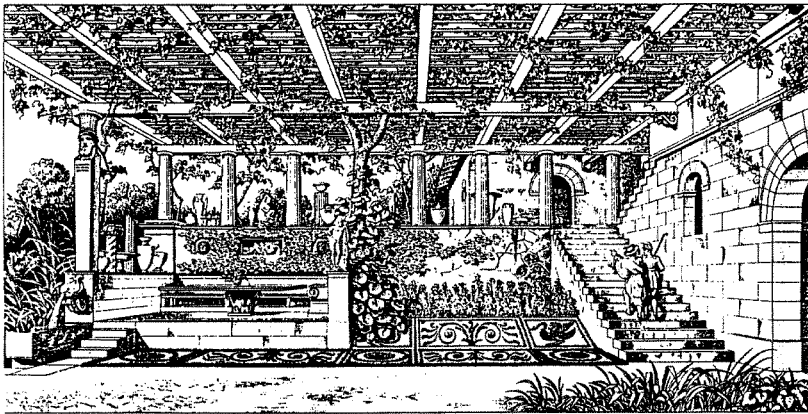
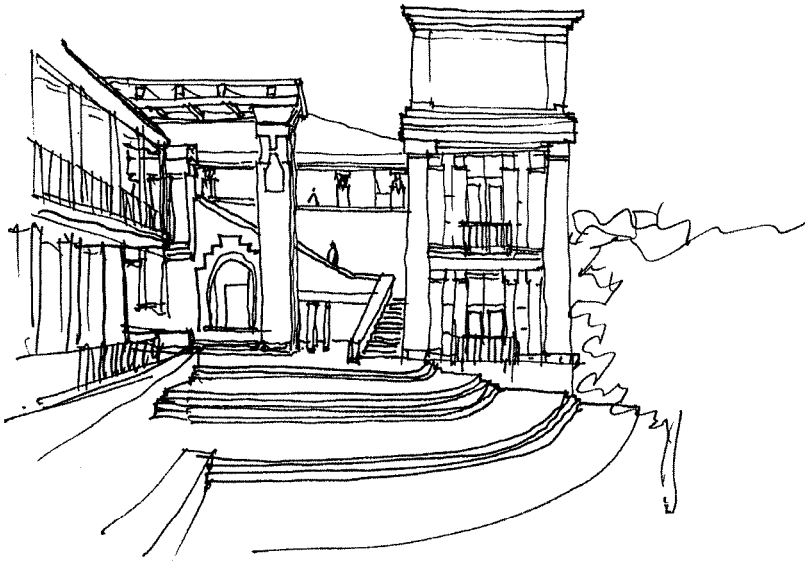
more familiarly scaled bricks and mortar of masonry walls. The power of miniatures plays a part here in concentrating our attention on a special inside (valley or court or mortar joint) very different from the vast bland outside, surprising even and satisfying as it helps give shape to our visions.

People love little things, from toy forts and doll houses to puppet theaters and *bonsai*, to miniature villages and electric trains. Probably their smallness makes us feel bigger than usual, and in better control. The dweller standardly seeks, like Goldilocks among her bears, a middle way, with surrounds neither too big nor too small, but just right. Sometimes, though, as for Alice or Gulliver, there is an advantage to scaling things up, or down, for a new look, a surprise, a convenience, maybe even an insight. Enlist me with Alice and Gulliver. There seems great potency in the world of little things from Disneyland to miniature villages to toy trains. At Disneyland on Main Street the buildings around you are about seven-eighths full size, diminishing on the upper floors to something like five eighths. The visitor therefore, is bigger than usual, and in fuller control. The

small surrounds aren't small enough to pinch but are small enough to give the visitor the great comfort of feeling supernormally in charge.

Disneyland is exciting and close to full size. But some of the same feeling comes from much smaller settings into which we have to project ourselves. The most seductive I know are in Alexander Girard's Folk Museum in Santa Fe, assembled out of folk art from all over the world in cases large and small. In large cases are river banks lined with boats and mountains of Hispanic and Indian and Victorian houses, and elegant drawing rooms, and Polish churches; small cases exhibit tinier treasures. It's an exotic world, but mostly friendly or at least exciting, as in the bull ring or in devil-bestrewn hell.

Miniatures help lead us into the realm of architectural fairy tales: There needs to be such a genre. Bruno Bettelheim wrote a fascinating book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, which describes the real need for fairy tales for children: to introduce them to evil in carefully measured doses that are real but surmountable, a kind of toxin antitoxin, not trivial or cute as they often become nowadays. Evil is serious, but



Top: Howard Hughes Biological Laboratory. Designed by Charles W. Moore. Drawing by Donlyn Lyndon. Bottom: Charlottenhof, Potsdam, Germany. Drawing by Karl Friedrich Schinkel.

mass can be taken as an equivalent of the absence of size — the basis for images that unsettle and freshen our perceptions.

You, Don, have pointed out that over the years I have depended increasingly on a design strategy that focuses on picking out a small part of each design to lavish attention on, relieving the rest of the design for more functional requirements. A case in point is the Howard Hughes biological laboratories at the University of California in San Diego, which is mostly laboratories carefully planned for light, filtered air, fume hoods and circulation, but without at first a particular focus.

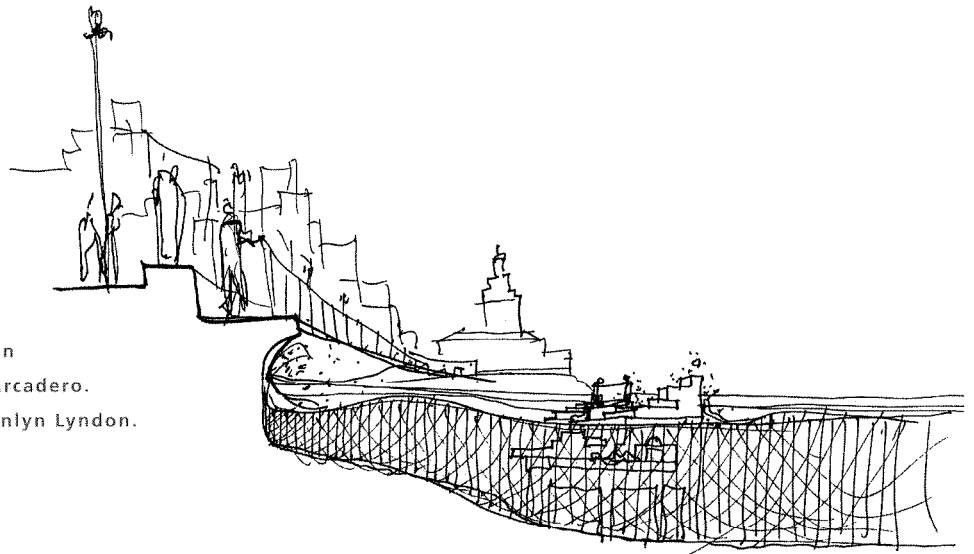
That left it to a courtyard in the center and an adjoining little tropical seminar building, which is shuttered for real air to blow in and out, to figure strongly in the place. That courtyard is a favored miniature. It looks, even, like a dazzling drawing of an early nineteenth century garden court at Charlottenhoff, in Potsdam, of Karl Friedrich Schinkel's, which gave me a head start on its details. Some of the scientists who were to use the space had occupied labs in the nearby Salk Institute (so their standards were very high).

I have been struck by your discussions of Kahn's reversal in his design of his served and servant spaces at the Salk to make the labs the servant spaces and the little offices and the towers, skewed to the sea view, the figural (though small) served spaces. I realize that we had followed a parallel track next door, twenty-five years later, to focus on the figure and carefully relax the ground. It seems to me that one of the most perplexing tasks of the maturing — or aging — architect is how to focus a not increasing amount of energy on a widening field of work. Focusing on miniatures is one effective way of keeping the focus at all.

— Charles

not invincible. The young hero or heroine in a seesaw struggle can deal with it — and however long they are on their mission, they'll make it home in time for tea.

I spent a springtime in Rome once looking for architectural fairy tales, and I found many: places, for instance, where the uncertain edge brushes up against the sheltered middle, as if a fresh breeze were blowing from a far off and mysterious place, as at the Aqua Paola, where formal openings in the facade give directly onto wild gardens just behind. It's not evil that we are overcoming here, but mass — or the presence of solidity, maybe, as an expression of reality. This absence of



Reef for the San
Francisco Embarcadero.
Drawing by Donlyn Lyndon.

Dear Charles,

I'm pleased that you recalled, in this regard, the reef that Bill Turnbull and I had planned just off the edge of San Francisco's Embarcadero. Its purpose was to provide for the urbanized bay-shore a miniaturized version of incessant surf-action such as that outside your condominium at the Sea Ranch. By creating an irregular disruption to the gentle swells of the bay it would have induced, at high tide, a turbulence of intertwining swirls, endlessly changing yet always roughly predictable. At low tide the turbulence would have increased, splashing around the forms of the reef, itself revealed as a repository of surprising sculpted elements, replete with pockets of still water and murky associations with the deep.

There is one difficulty, though, with your memory of the image — it was never intended to be made of wrecked autos. Now I will admit that they would have made shapes interesting enough for the water to curl around, and that they would have had the advantage of rusting, changing and fusing over time, and that they might have lent a certain macabre charm to the image; but we intended to make the reef of concrete, with walls, steps, pools and bronze and ceramic sculpture — items that would certainly become suitably layered with algae, but that would have the capacity still to capture moments of hopefulness.

It's curious that you should have remembered it in the likeness of

wrecked cars; perhaps it fused in your memory with the junk sculptures in the Berkeley mud flats, then on the opposite side of the bay, that I wrote about long ago, citing them as evidence of our generation's will to make some sort of free verse sense out of the global situation into which we had, in the fifties, been thrust. Now that our generation is at least partly responsible for the mess, free verse seems less hopeful, unfettered entrepreneurs appear as likely to destroy as to create, the romance with "collisions," so beloved in current critical discourse, is far less compelling.

To suppose that our reef could ever have made the tidal lapping of the bay become anything nearly as suggestive as the splendor of those surf-surrounded rocks outside the condo requires a considerable leap of faith. Yet it seems a suitable reason to return once again to the image — maybe dream is the better word — of creating places that have the qualities that characterize that surf-filled cove: deep history, exhilarating presence, fundamental lawfulness, cyclical change, sparkling light and infinitely surprising detail. It's an image we've admired there, in Chinese landscape paintings and in thousands of variants on the beach, in the forest, in vernacular cities and in the finest monuments of the baroque. And it's a dream worth pursuing in consort with nature and like-minded folk.

— Donlyn