

Into The Woods: Cultivating Spirit and Sustainability Through Nature as a Setting for Architectural Discovery

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"Forests were the first temples of God, and it is in the forests that men have grasped the first idea of architecture." --Vicomte François-René de Chateaubriand

Introduction

The extraordinary setting of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater raises our awareness and appreciation of the special qualities of woodlands, particularly at this time when the natural environment is being threatened by human activity. We have come to the understanding that we must discard obsolete ways of problem-solving and return to fundamental principles of practice in design with nature.¹ Where once our physical and cultural settings informed design, resulting in harmonious buildings and towns that were considered a *part of* the landscape (Fig. 1), today we live in a world driven by technology, industry, commerce, and at the expense of natural settings, resulting in a built environment that often separates us *apart from* the natural world.² Linkages between *place and time* and traditional knowledge of the land are being lost and threatened. With this threat, the spiritual joys of unity, belonging, and transcendence; the psychic experiences of wholeness, beauty, and harmony; and the physical features of balance, abundance, health, and security are likewise in danger of destruction.³ The fundamental goals of building for humanity in ways that promote sustainable communities, quality of life, and coherence with the resources must be addressed.⁴

Before we proceed, there are a few words that need to be said about what our paper does NOT focus upon, in response to comments made in the review critique: It is only tangentially about the use of the woods as settings for the design of new architectural projects or landscape design. It is not about the inclusion of woods in urban settings. It will not focus on biophilia or biomimicry (although we laud these two approaches to practicing architects). Nor is it about trees as inspirations for design. Our presentation presents the work of three architects who found early in their lives (in fact, in their formative years as children) the importance of the woods as a setting in which they discovered their love of architecture, and which provided a place to discover themselves as makers.

A Journey Through the Woods to Architecture

This paper explores the role of the woods as a place where individuals may first feel the yearning to create architecture. Specifically, the personal reflections of three architects offer insight into the

¹Lorimer, David. *Radical Prince: The Practical Vision of the Prince of Wales*. Edinburgh: Floris Books. 2003, pp. 33-34.

²HRH Charles, Prince of Wales. *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010, pp. 158, 237.

³Alexander, Christopher. "Empirical findings from the nature of order." *Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology*, Vol. 18, no. 1. 2007, p. 10.

⁴Abram, David. *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Vintage, 2012, pp. 277, 283.

importance that the forest played in their own evolution as young architects, starting in childhood. Reflected in the work of these architects, each has found within the woods the underpinnings of their design ethos: vernacular antecedents, spatial awareness of patterns and boundaries, ecological relationships and systems, seasonal rhythms and their minute changes, and the inherent qualities of beauty and richness in light, water, and materials of the earth. In short, for these architects the woods have inspired designs that celebrate the rituals and ethos of transcendent existence.

There are extraordinary connections between the natural world and the capacity for creativity in human beings. According to journalist Richard Louv, “Nature inspires creativity in a child by demanding visualization and the full use of the senses. Given a chance, a child will bring the confusion of the world to the woods, wash it in a creek, turn it over to see what lives on the unseen side of that confusion.” He concludes that in nature, “...a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace.”⁵ The architect Frank Harmon writes touchingly about the outdoors, woods, and water as perfect settings for cultivating a thirst for learning and discovery: “Children raised by creeks are never bored. Creek children don’t know about learning by rote, neither are they conditioned to working nine to five. Berries are their first discoveries, and birds’ nests, and watching the stars come out. Later they discover books. To creek children, learning is discovery, not instruction.”⁶

Fallingwater marks the spot on which the Kaufmann family first created a place in the woods, a spot they shared with loved ones. Part of the house’s lore is the story that the flat rock high above the falls was the place where Edgar and Liliane Kaufmann picnicked.⁷ This sacred place in the forest became the hearthstone of their living room fireplace. The rock ledges, trees, and rushing water of this wooded site is expressed in the myriad architectural features of Wright’s masterpiece.

We examine the work of three architects of transcendent spaces who trace their personal journey to architecture as a path through the woods of their childhood.

Susan Jones, an architect in Seattle, identifies the roots of her desire to become an architect in her many experiences as a child walking through natural environments, particularly the woods in which she grew up.⁸ On her way to school nearly every day, Susan walked through a forest. As a five-year-old, she watched the construction of the house her parents were building in the woods. Jones recalls the spaces of this house, the way the mountains stood majestically in the distance and formed the backdrop for her new home’s setting, how the trees filtered light as it came through her bedroom windows, the ways in which each of the rooms in the house felt different because of the aspect and views. The power of those experiences as a child in the woods, says Jones, has never left her. The relationship to nature, “the beauty and purity of material, texture, and light” fills her practice day to day she says⁹ One sees evidence of these elements--the forest light, color, textures, and scale--in Jones’s design for the renovation of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Seattle (Fig. 2), and the Marian Chapel of St. James Cathedral in Seattle.

⁵Louv, Richard. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. 2008, p. 7.

⁶Harmon, Frank. “Creek Children,” *Native Places*, March 17, 2021 (<https://nativeplaces.org/page/2>).

⁷Fallingwater.org. <https://fallingwater.org/history/about-fallingwater/designing-fallingwater/> Accessed 1/17/2020.

⁸Jones, Susan. “10th Anniversary Walton Critic Speaker Series on Culturally Sacred Spaces,” Unpublished Remarks, unpaginated, Catholic University of America School of Architecture and Planning, Washington, D.C., October 27, 2018.

⁹Ibid.

Tucson-based architect Rick Joy grew up in the countryside of rural Maine. As a boy, he spent much time on his own, playing outdoors in the rugged settings of the backwoods and farms. These early experiences were invitations to engage with the natural environment as a way to entertain himself and learning problem solving by building forts with whatever materials were at hand, assembling a playhouse from old barn siding and spools of baling wire and twine, and foraging for other materials and adventures among the rocks, trees, and streams. Through these experiences, Joy developed “an understanding of nature, loving it, being in it.”¹⁰ Joy’s time in forests and fields inculcated a sense of resourcefulness—part of New England’s culture best captured in an early-20th-century verse about legendary Yankee thrift: “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” When something broke, Joy learned how to fix it, getting by with the least. He has translated this resourcefulness into his architecture, particularly his early works, which he built himself.¹¹ This interest in how things work and how to mend them is most treasured in vernacular architecture, which puts an emphasis on practical solutions whose beauty is expressed through down-to-earth ingenuity and sensate human experience. Early vernacular architecture is also a hallmark for designing and building sustainably, as such practical yet beautiful solutions needed to conserve scarce resources. Joy has an affinity for the vernacular and his design for a house in the Vermont woods (Fig. 3) seems to best capture this translation between the resourcefulness he learned as a child in the woods, and the native genius of vernacular architecture.

Architect Tom Barrie spent his formative years outside of Boston, the geographical and intellectual wellspring of the Transcendentalists, with their focus on nature as a setting for transcendent experiences of the mind, spirit, and soul. Barrie notes that Henry David Thoreau described the virtues of an “authentic life” as being the products of creating and living in a simple cabin in the woods (in Thoreau’s case, on Walden Pond outside of Boston).¹² Barrie sees a lineage to Thoreau’s cabin from the “hermit scholar’s retreat” in Zen Buddhism: a setting for both the authentic life and enlightenment that offer meaning and connection through nature, family, setting, and purpose.¹³ The “mountain retreat” (Fig. 4) that Barrie designed in the woods of Boone, North Carolina, for himself and his family captures the unassuming nature of a simple cabin (in this case, not much more than 1,000 square feet). For Barrie, the structure on a wooded hillside becomes whole only “when the quotidian rituals and periodic celebrations inhabit and animate its spaces.”¹⁴ Rituals—in this case meals, fires, repose, and sleep—are what complete this simple house, much the way a church or a temple is made sacred only when the space hosts the rituals of a faith community. These expressions of architecture and design in support of the primary purpose of living a conscious life provide examples of the value of being in harmony with nature.

Conclusion: Design in Nature

The works of Jones, Joy, and Barrie point to a construct that is essential in building for the future in a way that not only sustains the natural environment but promotes the relationship of humans with nature, both physical and spiritual. This connection, while deeply innate, requires awareness beyond the subconscious and is of such value to the future of humanity that it needs to be

¹⁰Crosbie, Michael J. “Marvels of the Day,” in Rick Joy: Studio Joy Works. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2018, p. 13.

¹¹Ibid., p. 14.

¹²Barrie, Thomas. “The Domestic and the Numinous in Sacred Architecture,” in *Transcending Architecture: Contemporary Views on Sacred Space*, edited by Julio Bermudez. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press. 2015, p. 39.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 43.

consciously incorporated into the development and education, particularly with students of architecture, planning, and landscape architecture.¹⁵ Fortunately, recent major advances in science and technology have given us the ability to measure and prove the positive effects of experiencing nature on the human brain and body. The research of pioneering architect and physician Esther Sternberg, MD explores this symbiotic relationship of the mind, body, and spirit with nature in her groundbreaking book published in 2010, *Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well-being*. The formation of the Academy of Neuroscience For Architecture (AFNA) in 2003 takes this research into the next generation through the work of its members, both scientists and architects. The formation of the Academy of Neuroscience For Architecture (AFNA) in 2003 takes this research into the next generation through the work of its members, both scientists and architects.

We've titled our conclusion with a nod to pioneering Scottish architect Ian McHarg, who wrote the seminal treatise on successful human coexistence with nature *Design With Nature* in 1969. In the summer of 2017, the University of Pennsylvania launched a new interdisciplinary research center in McHarg's honor, The Ian L. McHarg Center for Urbanism and Ecology. The Center's mission is, according to its Website, to bring "...environmental and social scientists together with planners, designers, policy-makers, and communities to develop practical, innovative ways of improving the quality of life in the places most vulnerable to the effects of climate change."

We have seen that the planet is resilient—polluted rivers and wetlands can return to health with attention to their ecological systems; barren land on the point of desertification can be brought back to life with reforestation and soils management; wildlife species can be brought back into balance with careful reintroduction of predators to restore the food web. Similarly, the spirit of the sacred—the respect, honor, and belonging—can be nurtured in children and, indeed, all living beings disconnected from the lifeblood of this earthly plane.¹⁶ Through the thoughtful promotion of transcendent architecture found within archetypes and ancient universal symbols, the reintroduction of nature into cities through gardens and greenspace, the fostering of integrated design for healthcare,¹⁷ and simple opportunities for daily connection with sun and sky the well-being of the body, mind, and soul are improved.¹⁸ This connection to the spiritual found in nature and the lessons of nature's architecture¹⁹ are a fundamental part of human existence and deserve special attention in the pedagogy of environmental design. As professionals who seek the spiritual in all environments—both natural and those made by design—we hold a unique opportunity to promote architecture that fosters transcendent connections in humans and provide design that strengthens the planet and all living things.²⁰

¹⁵Alexander, p. 11; Kaplan, Rachel, Stephen Kaplan, and Robert Ryan. *With People in Mind: Design and Management of Everyday Nature*. Island Press, 1998, p. 28.

¹⁶Alexander, p. 10; Abram, David. *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Vintage, 2012, pp. 283-284.

¹⁷Marcus, Clare Cooper, and Naomi A. Sachs. *Therapeutic Landscapes: An Evidence-based Approach to Designing Healing Gardens and Restorative Outdoor Spaces*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

¹⁸Seamon, David. "Goethe, Nature and Phenomenology." In *Goethe's Way of Science: A Phenomenology of Nature*. In Seamon, David, and Arthur Zajonc, eds., pp. 1-10. SUNY Press, 1998, p. 10.

¹⁹Riegner, Mark. *The Phenomenology of Betweenness: Encountering Nature's Wholeness*. *Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology*, Vol. 25, no. 3: 18-21. 2014, p. 21.

²⁰Alexander, p. 11.

Illustrations

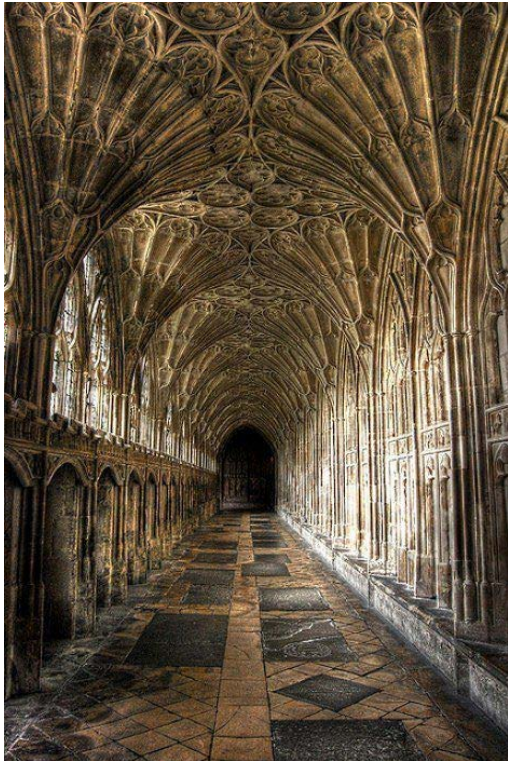


Fig. 1: Trees as architectural inspiration



Fig. 2: Susan Jones' St. Paul's Episcopal Church



Fig. 3: Rick Joy's Vermont House



Fig. 4: Tom Barrie's Mountain Retreat