

Landscape with Human Figure

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Building transcends physical and functional requirements by fusing with a place, by gathering the meaning of a situation. Architecture does not so much intrude on a landscape as it serves to explain it...
—Steven Holl, “Anchoring”

INTRODUCTION

A number of recent books, e.g., Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (2005), describe the phenomenon of globalization and the technological advances of the past three decades that have led to unprecedented opportunities in commerce, manufacturing, product design and development, research, education, collaborative ventures, information exchange, distribution networks, cross-cultural exchange, and research; critics of globalization have raised concerns about the prospect of the eradication of traditional local and regional cultures and the growth of a global monoculture.

The aim of the present discussion is not to opine on globalization’s impact on architectural education or on the profession of architecture but to consider Architecture’s ability to resist effectively an incipient global monoculture and the resulting downward slide to an architecture of ubiquity. Robert McCarter warns that, “In a time when we are incessantly told that we live in a ‘globalized’ world, and can no longer belong to, and draw our identity from, a particular place, the need for adaptations of modern architecture’s universal liberative spatial concepts to local culture, climate and landscape, and a parallel integration of innovative and traditional construction technologies and materials, is more pressing than ever before.”¹ In the face of the

powerful forces of globalization, how does a work of architecture respond to and express the unique circumstances of site and context? How does a work of architecture explain real and figurative landscapes as well as “the meaning of a situation”?

To ignore considerations of cultural values and traditions, place, history, or a regional vernacular or to insist that contemporary architecture is no longer concerned with the specifics of site and context is a narrow, superficial and highly limited way to view the world. It is to reject one of architecture’s essential attributes, “a unique fusion of form and place.”² Recalling Steven Holl’s essay “Anchoring” and the dictum that “a building is more than something merely fashioned for the site,”³ how is a work of architecture to be understood simultaneously as *universal* as well as *individual*, as *general* as well as *particular*?

This paper describes Brian Healy’s proposal for *A Small Lodge*, a small multi-unit residential project in Saint Helena, California, and seeks to frame Healy’s design as a compelling response to two questions:

- How does a work of architecture maintain its local and regional identity in the face of a globalized culture that threatens to render that work ubiquitous?
- How does a reciprocal relationship between building and context preserve and protect a local identity while simultaneously modifying and enriching that identity?

Healy’s design for a site in the Napa region is a poetic response to a *tangible* context—most obvious-

ly, the grid organization of the vineyards—as well as a multitude of *intangible* contexts: the history of Napa Valley, the regional building vernacular, the cultivated landscapes of the region, the strong agrarian tradition, and the rituals of grape harvesting, wine production, and wine tasting. The success of Healy’s project is rooted in the designer’s ability to weave considerations of regional culture and tradition, the physical characteristics of the site, and a deeply personal interpretation of the essence of site and context in a rich and poetic manner as well one that is clear, compelling, and highly expressive. McCarter observes that “...Healy’s works are invariably carefully fitted into their place” and “...are deeply rooted to their sites, enclosing both interior and exterior space, and weaving their occupants into the local place.”⁴

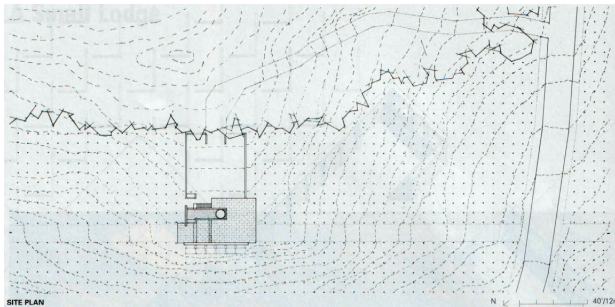


Figure 1: Site Plan, *A Small Lodge*

THE CONSTRUED SITE

Holl insists that an architectural work “explain” its various landscapes, that the architect seek to identify, collect, synthesize, and represent the tangible and intangible contexts that are the essence of a particular site. Strong words, but where does one look for a more specific description of the strategies for addressing site and context, for those approaches that might lead to an elucidation of a site?

Carol Burns’ seminal essay “On Site: Architectural Preoccupations” begins with a description of two possible conceptions of site and context: the Cleared Site, “an assumption that the site as received is unoccupied, lacking any prior constructions, and empty of content”, and the Constructed Site, which emphasizes “the visible physicality, morphological qualities, and existing conditions of land and architecture.”⁵ Burns writes, “By denying or erasing the site, and by reducing its physical and tempo-

ral dimensions through a limited appropriation, the cleared site and the constructed site circumscribe the productive potential of the site.” Burns presents a third approach, the Construed Site. The Construed Site emphasizes a process of discovery, “the investigation [of an]...existing situation...to discover its latent qualities or potential; inherent conditions can motivate the ensuing construction so that the new participates in the existing.”⁶

The mere *replication* of an existing physical context (the Colonial Williamsburg approach) is neither desirable nor consistent with notions of a ‘construed’ attitude toward site and context. (Kurt W. Forster notes “If the forms of the past are lowered over our heads like bell jars, what other fate would our present life suffer but that of the suffocating pigeon in an airpump?”) It is just as evident that an arbitrary collection of allusions (the Disney World approach) reduces the work to cacophony, a nearly incomprehensible collection of glib quotations and asides. The illumination of site and context relies on a high level of engagement *between* context and architecture, an informed dialogue that seeks to reveal “latent qualities and potential” and emphasizes investigation and discovery as activities critical to the design process.

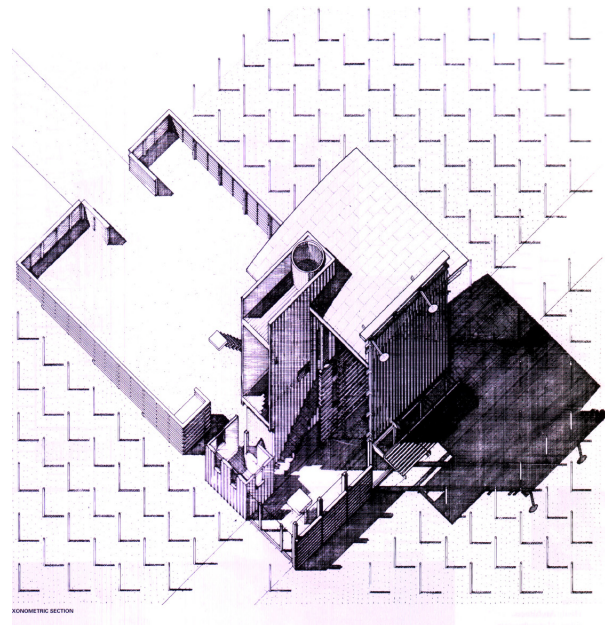


Figure 2: Cutaway Axonometric, *A Small Lodge*
(Entry Courtyard at upper left)

A SMALL LODGE

Brian Healey's award winning design, *A Small Lodge*, is sited in a Saint Helena vineyard along a road connecting Napa and Sonoma Counties. One can see Napa Valley from the site. The project is an explicit response to a tangible context—most obviously, the distinctive grid organization of vineyards—as well the intangible context of the building vernacular of the region, the regional commercial culture, the natural and cultivated natural of Napa Valley, and the rituals associated with wine growing, wine production, and wine tasting.

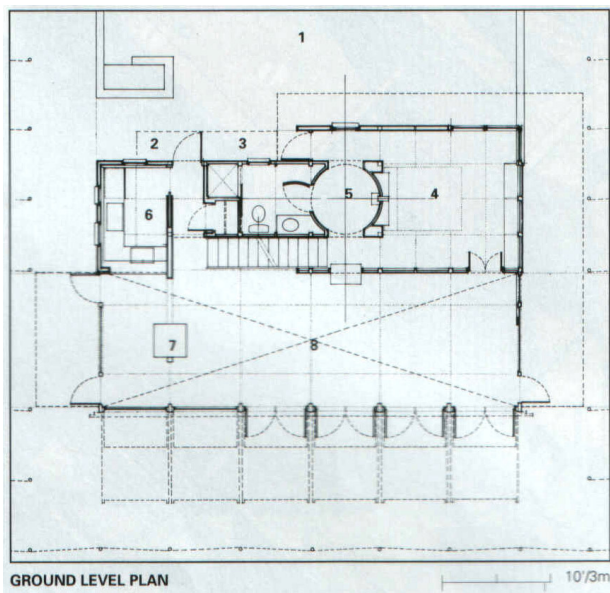


Figure 3: Ground Level Plan, *A Small Lodge*

The arrival sequence through a series of increasingly refined landscapes is carefully considered: From a distance, the primary façade is a two-story slatted screen that floats above the vineyard, a westerly facing timber latticework that shades the living room from the afternoon sun and is reminiscent of rustic California billboards of the 1940's as well as the anonymous farm buildings of the region. Healy writes, "The artifacts of different periods of development can be found along the highway—barns, motels, billboards, impromptu churches, and service garages—and they provide a palette ripe for interpretation."⁸ This is an architectural design that celebrates daily life in Napa and Sonoma and the inherent merits of good honest work; this is a proj-

ect that eschews blue blazers and silk neckties in favor of a soft shirt, jeans, and well-worn boots.

The primary spatial volume of the building, the living room, aligns with a service road—a long slot of space that cleaves the grid of the vineyard. Visitors exit a paved road onto a meandering gravel drive and proceed uphill through a wooded area before turning sharply left to arrive at the entry courtyard of the Lodge. The entry to the courtyard accentuates the boundary between woodland and vineyard, between chaos and order.

The organization of the house is a series of spatial layers orthogonal to the regular grid of the vineyard and running parallel to the forest-vineyard boundary and the service road. Entry to the building and circulation through the building is typically along the boundaries of the spatial layers. Like Richard Meier's Smith House, a relatively closed and literally dense layer is prologue to the open slot of the living room: a double-height volume surrounded on three sides by the vineyard, an in-between space that marks the overlap of interior and exterior. Unlike the Smith House, an elusive but occupiable third spatial layer—the liminal counterpoint to the dense volume adjacent to the entry courtyard—holds the important ground between the slatted façade cum billboard and the edge of the vineyard.

The building, rather than sitting or resting on a neutral piece of ground, is engaged with the site and its various contexts in a multitude of ways. Brian Healy writes:

We are being bombarded with a refrain of imminent singular global culture detached from both time and place. But every encounter between a building and a person who visits it occurs at a particular time in a particular place. It is the real power of architecture, the power to connect us to where we are in the world. It cannot be any place. It is always some place.⁹

The case for a Construed Site approach at Saint Helena, a means to identify, investigate, and interpret the site's unique combination of attributes—and "explain" them—is made based on three points:

1. The high level of engagement between the tangible context and the building. The influences of the vineyard grid and the slot of the service road (a spatial sluice) are evident in the design of Healy's *A Small Lodge*. More importantly,

the double-height volume of the living room makes manifest the overlap of the rectilinear domestic landscape of the residence and the regular agrarian landscape of the vineyard. The volume establishes a location, a place, within the expanse of the non-hierarchical grid.

2. The high level of engagement between the intangible contexts and the building. The carefully choreographed sequence of arrival, a sequence that includes a variety of real and metaphorical thresholds, culminates in the ritual sampling of the vintner's best while surrounded by expansive fields of grape plants. Here the process, poetry and rituals of grape growing and the production of excellent wine is expressed and celebrated without the need for the heavy-handed use of symbols or allegorical figures. One's senses are heightened. The visitor reflects on the significance of the act of making; here the craftsmanship and inventiveness of architectural space and form finds their reciprocal in a glass of very good wine. *A Small Lodge* is an architectural work to be savored experientially as well as cerebrally.
3. The revelation of the "latent qualities and potential" of the site. What is the poetic potential of the regional building vernacular? Healy's synthesis of local artifacts—rustic billboards, weathered barns, crumbling outbuildings, and the ghosts of fences and farm equipment—into a rich architectural syntax and vocabulary for *A Small Lodge* simultaneously connects the project to the regional building vernacular and enriches that vernacular. Robert McCarter notes that "...Healy endeavors to seek the essence of his discipline, architecture, as defined by its place and time—an American architecture, born of the commonplace and the vernacular, yet at the same time engaging the great works of our modern predecessors."¹⁰ The slatted and gridded semi-transparent construction of the façade to the vineyard (and its oblique nods to Purist still-lives, Garches, the boxes of Joseph Cornell, and the paintings of Robert Slutzky) is the vineyard grid presented vertically, presented in a manner that allows us to look through and beyond, to the exquisite life within. Like Charles Sheeler's photographs of the mechanized landscapes of the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge Plant, Healy's re-presentation of utilitarian artifacts transforms and elevates those artifacts to a work of art. The sun drops below the horizon, a loaded farm truck ambles by on the road below, stars appear overhead, and

the fragile light-filled two-story volume of the living room floats within and above the vineyard. Who could wish for more?

CONCLUSION

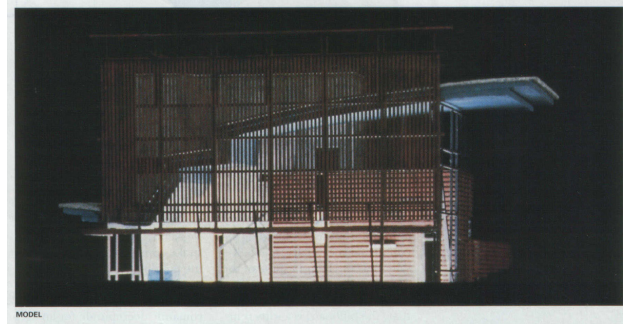


Figure 4: Model, *A Small Lodge*

The means for resisting the undesirable effects of globalization are readily available if only we choose to employ those means. Understanding, investigating, and valuing the physical site and associated tangible and intangible contexts as a Construed Site, an approach that seeks to identify the latent qualities and potential of a site, enables Architecture to resist the threat of a global monoculture by establishing work or architecture as both universal and particular.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Robert McCarter, "Common Sense: Toward an Architecture both Poetic and Practical," *Commonplaces: Thinking about an American Architecture* (San Rafael, CA: ORO Editions, 2008, Brian Healy, author), p. 7.
- 2 McCarter, "Escape from the Revolving Door...", *Pamphlet Architecture No. 12: Building; Machines* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1987), p. 9.
- 3 Steven Holl, "Anchoring," *Anchoring* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), p. 9.
- 4 McCarter, "Common Sense," p. 9.
- 5 Carol Burns, "On Site: Architectural Preoccupations," *Drawing/Building/Text* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991, Andrea Kahn, editor), p. 152.
- 6 Burns, p. 154.
- 7 Kurt W. Forster, "Traces and Treason of a Tradition: A Critical Commentary on Graves' and Eisenman/Robertson's Projects for the Ohio State University Center for the Visual Arts," *A Center for the Visual Arts: The Ohio State University Competition* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1984, Arnell and Bickford, editors), p. 138.
- 8 Healy, p. 15.
- 9 Healy, p. 17.
- 10 McCarter, "Common Sense," p. 9.