Imagine Universal, Design Local

FRED ESENWEIN
University of Pennsylvania

> There can be no such thing as a "global village." No matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can fully live in it only by living responsibly in some part of it. Where we live and who we live there with define the terms of our relationship to the world and to humanity. We thus come again to the paradox that one can become whole only by the responsible acceptance of one's partiality.
> - Wendell Berry, "The Body and the Earth"[1]

The conundrum of thinking about the global and local scale is not new. In the eighteenth century, Johann Herder defended the local cultures while the Enlightenment pushed for a universal language and culture leading towards the reasonable and rational completion of human civilization. Herder saw this as eradicating local native cultures, such as the languages and myths belonging to Native American tribes. Herder's argument was that local cultures should be left alone to develop on their own path because the variety of paths converged to one point of origin. While their traditions were unique, their reason for being was universal amongst all cultures, whether Native American, European, African, or Asian. This was evidence that a universal idea could be expressed in manifold ways. Each local expression of the universal idea gave identity to the culture, which the Romantics paralleled with the variety of life found in nature. This kept the world alive and interesting because the expressions of ideas matured with the progress of cultures and, the Romantics argued, free from the monotony the Enlightenment was imposing on the world.[2] The debate continues to this day, although our difficulty in addressing the concern derives from a blurring of the lines. We feel a desire to think globally and at the same time design locally. My contention is to imagine the universal and design local as exemplified with the agrarian custom of the United States.

The agrarian essayist, Wendell Berry, states clearly the paradox we face when we want architecture to be global and, at the same time, have a local identity. Globalization does not care about places; it is interested in removing all local identity in favor of a public image. For Berry, globalization is an abstract term, a concept with no grounding.[3] This is a particular problem for architecture since a building requires a foundation. If a building grows out of its local community, rather than from an abstract force impressed upon it, the building has the potential to be *sustainable* and *organic*. It is sustainable because it is an expression of a universal idea passed down from our primitive origins into the present. It is organic because it is grows from the sustaining idea the local community understands as a universal idea.

A universal idea is an idea that derives from our humanity and our understanding of a higher order. Louis Kahn understood this when he spoke about order. When an artifact follows its "will to be," order governs the design. For instance, in Kahn's poem, "Order Is,"

> The same order created the elephant and created man.
> They are different designs
> Begun from different aspirations
> Shaped from different circumstances.[4]

Kahn elaborates upon his use of the word "circumstantial" when he talks about form and design. Form has no defined shape and no measure

and represents a universal idea, such as a house or school. For instance, when Kahn describes the origin of a school as a man sitting under a tree with a group gathered around him, there is an image of school in its pristine essence. Any building an architect designs has an image as its essence, but the physical building has a different appearance determined by context and situation. Design expresses the form by addressing the particulars of the locality. When architects imagine architecture, which is itself a universal idea, they employ order to design a locally appropriate building.

Order is universal and governs particulars. Beings in the world have their place established by an order that exists, but is not clearly intelligible. Order, like Aristotle's entelechy, is a force driving organisms towards their mature completion. The specific characteristics of their appearances and purposes vary due to circumstances. Even though Kahn is not an agrarian, his use of order corresponds to Berry's use of the word. Berry claims a nurturer, such as a traditional farmer, orders the land while the exploiter, such as a strip miner, organizes it. The nurturer orders because the concern is the health and vitality of the place through the act of taking care of the land, replenishing it, and sustaining its resources, such as fuel. The exploiter, for Berry, organizes expediency for the most gain and highest production at the land's expense. The nurturer, therefore, lives in a local place and labors for the benefit of a universal order governing the world.

Our ability to control nature is evident in how we talk about technology. Berry describes two different users of technology, exploiters and nurturers. The exploiter uses technology as the driver of operations. In order to use modern machine technology on the farm, the machines require outside resources. However, the nurturer can rely on the land by understanding how to use it. The process is organic because it relies on what is natively provided to make best use of what the land can produce. This method enables the farm to sustain itself for generations with minimum outside dependence. The change from the nurturing farmer to the exploiting farmer, according to Berry, was the introduction of the tractor. Before the tractor, mule and horse teams plowed the land, ate food produced on the farm, and contributed to the fertilization of crops. All the parts of the farm contributed to the life of the farm; it was an organic whole. With the

tractor, fuel and fertilizer have to be purchased outside the realm of the farm, and thus necessitate a dependence on the global world.[5]

Berry's argument has direct relevance to the world of architecture. One of his comments regarding technology is "not to invent new technologies or methods, not to achieve 'breakthroughs,' but to determine what tools and methods are appropriate to specific people, places, and needs, and to apply them correctly."[6] Frank Lloyd Wright presented the same idea in his lecture delivered in 1901, "The Art and Craft of the Machine."[7] Wright recognizes that machines are here to stay; there is no use resisting them because we cannot return to the days of handcrafted work made for the average person's income. Given that situation, the best approach is to control and restrain the machine's role. The artist or architect should consider the machine as a tool. When artisans and manufacturers work together, their relationship would produce works fabricated by machines but made by the mind of the artist. The use of the machine has potential to be a poetic tool.

Heidegger's essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," attempts to bring technology under the control of poetics. Heidegger begins with the origin of the word technology, which comes from the Greek words: *techne* and *logos*. *Techne* refers to making an object by a craftsman and *logos* means revealing. Heidegger distinguishes these terms from the word "poetics," which is a Greek word, *poesis*, referring to making, but more specifically meaning 'bringing-forth.' If an object is a product of *techne*, it has a functioning purpose and it reveals its purpose through its making by a craftsperson. Heidegger's argument is that the modern use of technology is not a revelation of nature through making, but challenging nature through manipulation. "The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy, which can be extracted and stored as such..."[8] Heidegger follows this statement with an example of a hydroelectric plant built on the Rhine River. The plant dams the river for the purpose of energy. The river serves the power plant rather than the power plant serving the river. Heidegger's reaction is that instead of making something using materials at hand and crafting the object through its own nature, modern technology attempts to utilize what is at hand for a

desired effect. Our tendency is to use technology as an instrument towards a material outcome rather than a revealing the quality of a made object. When we realize technology offers possibility, it opens the possibility of becoming poetic. It not only reveals, but inspires the imagination.

One example to connect technology and architecture in a poetic way is Berry's description of manipulating rain and water on a farm.

> [T]o facilitate both water retention drainage and drainage in the same place, we must improve the soil, which is not a mechanical device but, among other things, a graveyard, a place of resurrection, and a community of living creatures.[9]

For Berry, even the care of drainage has a poetic element because it is not only practical in removing water, but considers water and rain as part of the order in the world. The point is not to control water as a commodity but as part of the role in raising crops as a sacred rite. Directing water is a practical act in farming and in architecture. Architects and engineers work out roof drain calculations for runoff from impervious surfaces and sizing gutters, downspouts, and retention ponds. Berry recognizes these calculations are necessary, but no calculations address the qualities of handling water. It has the ability to become an expression in the design of the building as a poetic and practical solution.

At the heart of Berry's agrarianism is for the individual to dwell in the world as a member. The consequence for progress, as Berry sees it, is that we allow ourselves to be separate from the world we inhabit. We live in a local community, which for Berry requires membership and participation. However, we imagine ourselves in a global society where we, as individuals, are neither members nor participants; we are the abstract idea called the public. Berry uses a generic public building to illustrate the difference between community and the abstract idea of public. For instance, a public building is used by everyone and yet it belongs to no one.[10] Without a sense of ownership, a public building is an isolated object that is not a member of the community. The identity of a county office building, for example, is commonly non-descriptive or associated with an organized institution. One goes to this building to see a person behind a counter.[11] The alternative for Berry would be a building identified with the community.

Some examples where buildings are members of a community are the "jewel box banks" Louis Sullivan designed from c.1905-1920. Sullivan embellished these banks with murals depicting farm life, designed a highly elaborate public banking hall, and expressed the nature of the bank with his famous terra cotta ornament on the exterior. Most of these banks are relatively small and have a simple rectangular or cubic form, but the ornament design is different for each bank. The ornament, for Sullivan, gives each bank an identity.[12] One way to understand Sullivan's idea is to think of Henry David Thoreau's critique of ornament in architecture. In *Walden*, Thoreau criticizes architects who apply ornament to a house rather than expressing the character of the house itself and reflecting the nature of the people who live there. Therefore, the ornament of our houses is like our clothing; it properly identifies and embellishes our character.[13] Sullivan also does not see ornament as something applied to a building simply for the sake of being ornate. The local situation of a rural community suggested to Sullivan that the bank should be a place where farmers are equal to the bankers.[14] Hence, the main banking hall's rich interior was designed for the farmer, including the murals depicting an agriculture life. On the exterior, the elaborate ornament identifies the bank with the town and gives the community a precious object. Today, these banks continue as landmarks for their rural Mid-West communities.

While the common discourse on architecture is about the building as an object, we can frame the nature of the building as a being from the earth, which, in turn, gives it the qualities of an organism. Being a member means one is part of the life of the whole rather than simply a part of an isolated object. This requires the rejection of abstract ideas, such as "global" in favor of terms such as "earth." If one envisions the world as a globe, the world is a spherical object in space. Even a three dimensional map of the planet, a globe, is an object that can be placed anywhere, such as on the floor or on a shelf, in any room, or any building. It occupies space but does not rely on a place. In contrast, thinking of the world as "earth" has an entirely different set of associations. Our planet's name, its identity, is Earth because of the soil we can build upon and cultivate. Our relationship to it is very different because many religions claim we were made of earth and given life by the hands and

breath of a god-head. As we grow and mature, we become intimately a part of the growth and maturity of nature by raising our food, taking care of animals, and maintaining our resources. When we die, we are planted in the earth. The ritual of farming poetically has affinity with construction. Construction begins with the groundbreaking ceremony. Even our buildings are made from products originating from earth, whether it is wood, the lime and aggregate of concrete, or the iron ore in steel. By thinking of the world as earth, the imagination can think poetically about how the ritual and design of a building relates to an organism.

When we remove ourselves from our grounding, the professional architect faces an identity crisis. Today, the architect often becomes a design manager rather than a master builder. The architect manages consultants, the specialists, by transferring responsibility onto engineers, technicians, and manufacturers. The architect coordinates and attends meetings between the various parties involved with a project, such as the owner, government officials, and contractors. Communication between the contractor and owner travel through the architect, yet the architect has no direct control over either party during construction. The role of the architect becomes nothing more than a managerial position. The essence of what an architect does is scattered amongst the specialists, which Berry classifies as exploiters.

Now that we appear to live outside from our place with the world, how does one resolve the identity crisis? Berry's answer is a process of healing. It is about finding membership in the community where one actively engages with the life of the community. In architecture, the architect must regain membership in the building community. It becomes a process of healing through atonement. For Berry, healing through reconciliation is part of our engagement with the world and how we live in it.[15] We become "at one" with the world by working the land of which we ourselves are a part and particle. We grow and mature in the world as we mature through the phases of our life in accordance with the phases of nature. While not an idea often discussed in architecture, the architect, W. G. Clark, understands this ritual of reconciliation. Clark considers construction a destructive act. When we erect a building, we break the soil and tear up the land enclosed within the construction site.[16] The

aim for architecture, then, is to contribute something better than what was originally there. In this way, the architect atones for the construction of the building.[17] It becomes an offering of reconciliation with what was removed. It defines a new place that is part of the history of the site.

Membership in the community requires knowledge of history and tradition of the place. A particularly striking example comes from Berry's short story, "The Boundary."[18] The main character, Mat Feltner, takes his last walk across his farm by following the boundary of his land. During his journey, he finds artifacts and features reminding him of people and events that not only took place during his lifetime but numerous times over the course of generations at that place. The place and memory are in dialogue with each other. In *Jayber Crow*, Mat Feltner remembers the names and people in the town graveyard, and his stories bring them back to life. By the time Mat Feltner dies, only a few community members remain who are rooted in the place.[19] Essentially, the traditions and memories die with him. The place has a history repeating itself by passing the memory of a tradition from one generation to the next. Without the passing of memory, the community loses its identity. It exists on the map as an isolated object rather than as an organ on the body of the Earth.

One example in architecture that suggests something like Berry's description of memory is Middleton Inn, a project outside of Charleston, South Carolina designed under the guidance of W. G. Clark and Charles Menefee. The subtle iconography at Middleton Inn is a collection of fragments of memory from the city and the history of the place. Like Charleston, a city periodically ravished by war and natural disasters, Middleton Inn is a phoenix rising from the ashes. The site was part of a plantation destroyed during the Civil War and an abandoned phosphate mine. By using elements such as the arrangement of the stairs and masonry walls at particular places related to the houses of Charleston and the plantations, the inn is in the tradition of place and replaces the loss of activity at the site. One image shown in nearly every published interior photograph of the inn captures this best - the peacock chair.[20] The peacock, in iconography, represents resurrection corresponding to the Christian meaning of eternal life. The inn is a member of the community of

Charleston imagined from universal ideas of death and resurrection as expressed in a local context.

By seeking membership with the local community, we dwell in the world at large. Berry describes how local communities are pieces of a mosaic that constitute the whole of the world.[21] Each piece is vital to the mosaic in order to be sensed; no single piece presents the mosaic's composition. During the education of an architect, there are several remarks on how the building's parts relate to the whole. Since Vitruvius, one of the universal approaches we use to critique a building's design is to ask whether the details are referential to the overall composition of the building. Logically, this seems an appropriate measure to design global architecture. The fact that the details relate to the whole bears no significance to the building's site or context; it is typically a composed object that is self-referential. If we are designing a building that is truly *sustainable* and *organic*, it must arise out of the soil in which it is planted.

> Thus it is not the "sum of its parts" but a membership of parts inextricably joined to each other, indebted to each other, receiving significance and worth from each other and from the whole.
> - Wendell Berry, "Two Economies"

ENDNOTES

1   Wendell Berry essays cited in this paper are from a collection titled *The Art of the Commonplace*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2002.
2   Berlin. Isaiah. *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Henry Hardy, ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. 176-236.
3   Berry, "The Unsettling of America." In *The Art of the Commonplace*.
4   Kahn, Louis. "Order Is." *Perspecta* (Yale University) 3 (1955): 59.

5   Berry. "People, Land, and Community." In *The Art of the Commonplace*.
6   Ibid. "The Gift of Good Land." In *The Art of the Commonplace*.
7   Wright, Frank Lloyd. "The Art and Craft of the Machine." From *Frank Lloyd Wright: Essential Texts.* Robert Twombly, ed. (pgs. 43-79) New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2009.
8   Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology" in Basic Writings. David Farrell Krell, ed. (307-341) London: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008. 320.
9   Berry. "Two Economies." In *The Art of the Commonplace*.
10   Ibid. "*From* Sex, Economy, and Community." In *The Art of the Commonplace*.
11   Ibid. *Jayber Crow*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2000. The title character, Jayber Crow, often makes reference to "the man behind the desk" when alluding to an anonymous person working for an organization. The desk represents a boundary between the individual and the agent of an abstract institution.
12   For Sullivan's thoughts on ornament, see his essay "Ornament in Architecture" in *Kindergarten Chats and other Writings*. (pgs. 187-190)   New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1947.
13   Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. New York: Library of America, 1985. 360.
14   Twombly, Robert and Narciso G. Menocal. Louis Sullivan: The Poetry of Architecture. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2000. 48-51.
15   Berry. "*From* Sex, Economy, and Community." In *The Art of the Commonplace*.
16   Clark, W.G. "Three Places," in *Clark and Menefee*. Richard Jensen, author. (pgs. 13-14) New York: Princeton Architectyral Press, 2000.
17   Ibid. "Replacement," in *Clark and Menefee*. Richard Jensen, author. (pgs. 10-13) New York: Princeton Architectyral Press, 2000.
18   Berry. "The Boundary." In *That Distant Land*. Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004.
19   Ibid. *Jayber Crow*. From ebook - see chapter
20   Prof. Steve Thompson at Virginia Tech was involved with the design for Middleton Inn. When I asked him how to study the building, he answered, "The peacock chair is the key."
21   Berry. *Jayber Crow*. From ebook - see first paragraph in chapter 13.