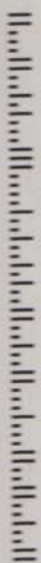


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Architect

A search for a sense of place took one of the city's most revered architects from a 100-year-old two-story in Victoria, Texas, to the mountains of Peru.

Photography by Kenny Braun

Stacey, my wife, is reading to me. A new fresh book thumbed open from her book stalagmite. It concerns the history of the number zero and how it represents both infinity and nothing simultaneously, like a one-point perspective drawing with its wily vanishing point. What does that point represent? Is it nothing? I can't see it. Is it an endless path with stuff all around it too small for me to see? Yes... it is... I think. Well, actually, I don't know.

I have been taught, and I fiercely believe, that the best way I can remain curious and open to learning is to realize I don't know anything beyond my own illusion of what I think I know. As an architect I'm curious about this designed world we create for ourselves. Where does it come from? I mean *really* come from? I'm still watching and trying to understand. People are creative creatures, and every one of us contributes to the design of our world, making tiny and large choices every day. So I'm wondering: What informs our decisions? Where do we learn to make those choices?

Born to an architect and an artist, I grew up living in a wonderful, well-composed house, where the art and styling of life were so seamless as to appear effortless. It was the modern home filtered through a 1960s-era attitude about design. Scale, proportion, shape, and color were all part of daily life. As a child I don't remember contemplating this, but now I believe it worked itself into my subconscious.

But something else worked itself into my subconscious too. My grandmother and my great-aunt provided love, food, and shelter for our extended-family gatherings, grand and small, at a 100-year-old two-story beporched house in Victoria, Texas. This house and yard were ordered and informal all at once. Porches, most of them screened, adorned all sides but north. That house taught me important things, things almost forgotten as I find myself farther from that place. Senses are vital to memorable and enjoyable placemaking. Bathrooms, simple, smelled of years of talc and soap. Security was a hook latch. You could smell and hear the outside from inside, and the inside from

out. Ears were aware of rustling leaves, church bells, muffled conversation, autos, feet on sidewalks, thunder, and cicadas. Nose detected cut grass, exhaust, and rain, or what's on the stove or in the oven. I remember the *sprong* sound of the contracting screen-door spring half a second before the woody knock and slap as the door came to rest, announcing a recount of who was inside and who was out. Upstairs the Gulf breeze ran freely past the pecan leaves, the cicadas, and the screens to cool me as I napped on the line-dried cotton linens. Muted conversations of familiar voices drifted up from their seats, chasing the dappled light of the day from the gaggle of free-range metal chairs that roamed the yard.

The endearing qualities of this architecture, this home, this small and humble place on the earth, did not spring forth from design decisions made with pencil and paper. Rather it emerged from the thoughtful, loving act of a place well used and occupied. Sometimes I think these qualities trump all the skillful and carefully finessed design efforts we put into an actual piece of architecture.

For two weeks this summer I traveled through Peru with my wife and two daughters. Between the Alps-like mountains, in valleys cut by snowmelt rivers, I saw a people who live beauty. They have not lost touch with the gifts nature brings and the lessons it has to teach us about scale, proportion, symmetry, and geometry. They see nature's composition, its shapes, textures, colors, movement, and response to light. I saw that reflected in their design of everyday activities: the stacked wood, the potatoes arranged to dry on a woven mat in the sun, the perfect arc of the red earth curling up from the ox-drawn plow.

How can I foster this in my practice? What is the secret ingredient? What are the elusive, intangible qualities that make a place? I am paying attention, trying to find them, to understand how they can be fostered. But I work within my own illusion—from my own one-point perspective—knowing that the question can never be fully answered. ■