

**BOOK REVIEW: *Dwelling, Seeing, Designing: Toward a Phenomenological Ecology* edited by David Seamon (1993) State University of New York Press; Albany**

The marriage of phenomenology to environmental design is a profound attainment that replaces the creation of scenographic, geometry-bound *spaces* with experiential, meaning-rich *places*. Genuine place-making is one of the prime emphases of this important book. By “place” we mean, “impalpable territories of social activities and meanings projected onto entire assemblages of buildings and spaces...in determinate wholes” (Relph, p. 26). “A place then [comprises] a specific landscape, a set of social activities, and webs of meanings and rituals, all inseparably intertwined” (ibid, p. 31). “A place is a whole phenomenon, consisting of three intertwined elements of a specific landscape with both built and natural elements, a pattern of social activities that should be adapted to the advantages or virtues of a particular location, and a set of personal and shared meanings” (ibid, p. 34). “The word “place” is best applied to those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other” (ibid, p. 37).

Another major theme of the book is that a phenomenological perspective applied to the design of built environment de-emphasizes the role of outside “experts” and relies instead on the actual lived-experience of the people dwelling therein. “Master planning by outside “experts” is replaced by the self-conscious awareness and concern of users themselves” (Seamon, p. 333). From this perspective, “design begins and ends with the lived experiences of the users for whom the place is being transformed” (Dovey, p. 260). “[P]laces have to be made largely through the involvement and commitment of the people who live and work in them; places have to be made from the inside out...there must be as much community involvement in place-making as possible” (Relph, p. 34). And this, of course, requires a whole new methodology and attitude toward design: “Trying to design or reclaim places is, therefore, rather like trying to make or modify life itself. In this effort it is wisest to adopt the gentle and patient manner of an environmental *midwife*” (Relph, p. 38, emphasis added). “[T]he environmental designer can become a midwife who helps insiders articulate local needs and then translates those needs into design incorporating wider contextual concerns” (Seamon, p. 12). If the designer-as-midwife is assisting local users in articulating and providing a setting for their needs, then I have always thought that it would be very beneficial to take users through an educational process first – an indoctrination of sorts – so that they may be able to *expand* what they perceive as possible, both within their cultural lifeways and within the realm of human potential itself.

Heidegger is often referenced in this collection in order to define phenomenology in a way useful to designers, as in this passage by Dovey: “Phenomenology asserts the primacy of the lived-world of everyday experience (*lebenswelt*) as the field of scholarly inquiry. The lived-world is the pre-scientific experience of our world, before we have learned to detach ourselves from it and view it as having a separate objective existence. Thus, for Heidegger (1962), there is no being apart from a ‘world;’ rather, there is first and only ‘being-in-the-world’ (p. 248)... ‘Being-in-the-world’ is anchored in *lived-spaces*, thus lending it an ontological significance” (p. 249, emphasis added).

At this point I’m grappling with the distinctions between a ‘phenomenological ecology,’ a ‘phenomenological ontology,’ and a ‘phenomenological epistemology’ – and why not a phenomenological hermeneutics? For that matter, there must be important distinctions between ‘phenomenologies of place,’ ‘epistemologies of place,’ and ‘ontologies of place’ – or why not a hermeneutics of place? Yet these contemplations are beyond the scope of this review.

One more important element mentioned a couple times in the book is Norberg-Schulz’s conception of the “genius loci” – the “spirit of a place” – “a living, indwelling spiritual presence or energy in a particular place that is antecedent to human awareness” (Howett, p. 69). The presence of genius loci suggest that there is a phenomenology to a landscape independent of human usage or experience, such that designers will exhibit adeptness by skillfully enhancing the indwelling spirit of the landscape and perhaps using it as a template in fourth- and fifth dimensional space-time?

Despite any further speculations inspired, this book stands on its own merit and marks an important transition in the epistemology of design – especially sustainable design – by re-incorporating ‘ecology’ as intimately involved in human experience, not just a science of the backdrop of an independent natural world upon which the ever-so-personal human drama is objectively super-imposed.