



Connections

the "What's" of
Creating Buildings

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(these pieces were written during seven mornings away, on an exercise bike, thinking of Peter Morris)

(the pictures of 21st century are of work done by Duo Dickinson)

1) The What We Do



We can try anything.

We can know why we do, or not.

What we do is done, whether we understand our motivations or not. Whether we desire an outcome or not. In the things that matter, we plan, study, practice or rationalize, what we do. The “What’s” we inveigh on our buildings are what this set of pieces is about.

Architecture is a fully planned, studied, composed creation. Once made, we react to it. To justify our reactions we analyze, rationalize even invent reasons why we create. Others can react. Our “reasons” are without meaning in the moment the “What’s” we create are experienced. It is a good idea to understand the “What’s” we can bring to bear on the buildings we make.

In seven sections, this piece offers an order of thinking about “What” we consider, listen for, and implement in the creation of any building. This introduction then offers six ways to consider the ways to realize the creation of a design:

Connection

Ascension

Welcome

Order

Threshold & Reward

Balance

The sequence is intentional and can be applied to any building or part of a building – and from the smallest feature to the community being considered.



Why do I do what I do?

Despite knowledge, I do not assemble what I create. I create what I assemble. The why's are known and described: The "Why" is unavoidable but the explicit "What" that is created needs definition.

It is hard to believe in a world of 2D judgments, but the outcomes of what we see are not the generator of any of these ways of perceiving. No pre-fixed outcome should determine the design of a building. What is understood when the design begins is the context, the values, the possibilities and the means that are part of any design scenario. Each thing, each "What", after that is simply the result of discerning the time, facts, even laws (Including money) that are part of every problem.

But none of these truths are the genesis of the creation. The humans creating the buildings are. Humans see them, too. That reception is a "What" not a "How", or even a "Why". We cannot program ourselves to judge correctly, or we are trying to be who we are not. We react, in the way we were made -and we did not make ourselves. Our lives were given to us –

and it is given to us to try to understand the “What” of who we are when create things that become part of everyone’s life who encounters them.

No outcome is “correct”, but some are fully safe or ignorant. Most buildings that are built are not trying to do the most in the crucible of context, they just try to do enough. They are safe. Defendable. Rationalized. Understood. Enough is not enough for me. That is why I write this. That is why I do this. Why we do everything: if we listen.

That is, in the end, why we are not the tree or the fish. We know more of “What” we might do, and it is not easy.



2) Connection



What is done is not created in the mind, the world gives it to you.

Object creation is sculpture. It is almost always a creation of the mind, in the mind, then offered to view, always with a context. Of course some sculpture in landscape relates to it, even to be used in the world. For most creators it is so easy to fall into the making of an object that we invent its justification. A “School” of design merely rationalizes our need to retroactively control outcomes and define the reasons we create.

Formulas are great for making food, but the understanding of construction is the only formula architects need if they start with one central desire: Connect. But it is a willful act to deny the impulse to control, the laziness to make what is in your mind.

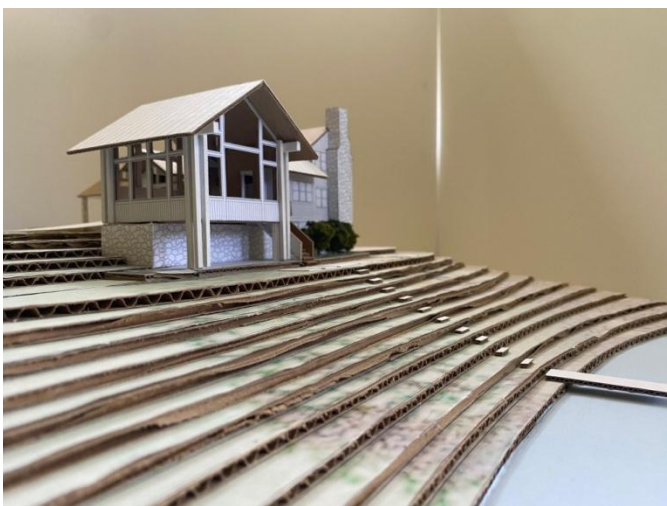
240 years of tree was here before you, should be here after you, and as will many of the buildings we create. To ignore what is when we make what will be is folly. The world as foil is a way to amuse ourselves in the joy of laziness and empowerment, but it is, after a chuckle, irrelevant.

Unless we see where we are, what we do is just for us. Survival, even education demands that, but when we are making things beyond ourselves – all architecture – is outside of us.



Somehow, the fully human laziness of object creation think-do control has made for industries of justification – called “Styles” . The replacement of who we are, what a place is, the humanity that lives in and with our buildings, with a preprocessed, vetted, “correct” application of mindless niceties is so much easier than thinking about the connections to be made with you, the site, the users, the culture, that is there when you are not.

Connecting those things that are not you with you, then with the world through your design is the harder path. It is unsure, takes time and depends on your knowledge of building and listening beyond yourself. School has proven not to prepare designers for this. Education defaults to things that connect only us to us – the things we can control. Doing is the best way, and means failures and change: but understanding happens.



In thinking about the “What” that inevitably follows the creation of a thing in the world, the start should be to understand what is there, before you,

and after you, that you will connect with. The realization that colliding with, ignoring, or destroying the realities you are given is not connecting, it is attempting to control what you do not understand.

So connection is just understanding, and understanding only comes from listening. Not control.

The human desire to control is based in fear – fear of the unknown or in our inability. Connection, by understanding, by listening ends fear. Truth is just truth. Not an invention, design or construction – and you cannot collide with, ignore or destroy it. Truth is there before you and after you. Listen to it.



3) Ascendance



It's too easy to ascribe geometry to the human experience. The rationalization of what we feel, or what we want to express is dumbed down by dimension: so the word "vertical" is not Ascendance.

We cannot help but look up, physically but reactively. The nature of space and shape encourages or discourages that natural, positive reaction. Architects can "work out" the designs we conceive, or we can see the human possibilities in how the buildings we help create are experienced.

A flagpole is ascendant, but it is an object, one and done. Buildings can be ascendant not in the rote creation of vertical things but by the shape, spaces and light we form them with. If the Plan, the horizontal paths of what buildings accommodate dominates the design, then the building loses its humanity beyond taking care of business. That reality is most of what gets built, because function is the primary reason most things are made.

The joy of creation is also why things are built, and that joy has a direct offspring in Ascendance. We can focus into iconic spots, even bathe in a building's harbor – but thrill, the natural energy of connection with the ascendant in our hopes, is not manipulation or triggering, it's just a fact of life.



The beauty of the touch of hope, the reward of expectation is as tangible as the protection buildings offer. Beyond geometries of construction, there is light, natural light, always above us, always making alive the dead realities of any building.



Space and Light are the tools that teaching unveils to students, but the results in every human who sees a tree, a sunset, the stars is at night are greater than any application of an outcome imposed on a possibility.

The literal Ascendance of ceilings and stairs are the easiest manipulables, because the spaces they create for d a vertical response, first eyesight, then body, then perception.



The raw application of height, light, even vista needs all the other aspects we bring to bear when creation happens – all the “whats”. The outcomes are easy to define and prescribe, the wrote formula’s of any “Style”. The motivations, the basic act of listening to discover what is in each context, client, and cultural moment makes listening essential, and then understanding construction to manifest the potentials of each scenario. School does not teach things well, it is the person who has a mission to help make buildings that needs to find the experience needed that allow the outcomes of building to be realized, not prescribed.

4) Welcome



Every place has a way to it. The ones we make greet us, from afar. No matter the context – landscape, cityscape, wall – buildings are used and thus have to be accessed. Shape and space without use is sculpture, so discovery upon encounter is part of what they are.

The wave of recognition, the promise of harbor, the handshake of acceptance and the hug of safety are the way buildings become part of us – the maker and the user – even by those who encounter what we make, without use.

So in the “What” of what we make, the Welcome is the first social connection, the promise of humanity after encounter, and the hope of harbor for those approaching.



Rather than tacking on cover, the Welcome of a place is part of it: the place after encounter, finding safety from the world, preparation before entry,

then introduction upon arrival. A hole does the job of access, Welcome greets, protects, and unveils the world within the place you enter.



How we know a building starts by how we come to use it, to be accepted into it, how the building lives in the world, with us – and that goes beyond the mystery, the tease, even the beauty of composition when the reality of Welcome is central in the way a place is understood.



Part of every way we use any building, the Welcome as part of its genesis is at the heart of how the building will be perceived, no matter what “Style” or “precedent” or “eye candy” is applied to whatever shape is formed. The Welcome is not additive, it is essential to What we make.



5) Order



Creation for its own sake is Fine Art. Creation that serves the user requires Order in its design, or use is incidental to Expression. Expression in the world of shape and space without use is sculpture. Buildings must do more, but only if there is Order in the choreography of what makes them.

Connection, Ascendance, Welcoming are possible when the building supports them. The often unseen realities of systems (mechanical, structural, movement) can be seen, felt, expressed. Every being has support systems: skeleton, shell, pulmonary, digestion. Buildings do too.

Those systems are not necessary evils. Beauty in expression is not limited to shape and space. How a creation is formed is not skin deep. What we make in architecture goes beyond intent into realization – the step from shelter into aesthetics either includes order, or the aesthetics are the order, and all the ways a building is not a sculpture are fudged from view, hidden and wished away.

Each of us is all of what we are, beyond our skin: so are buildings.



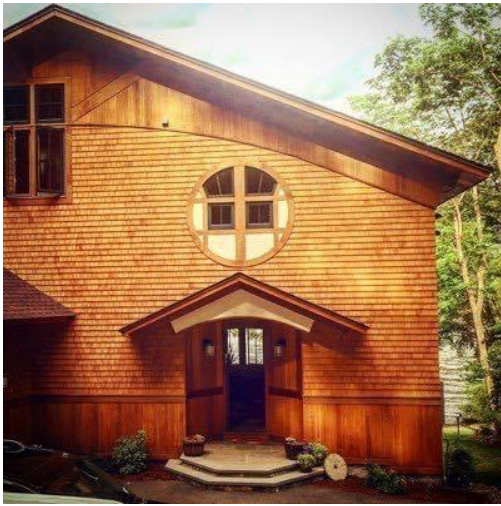
You can weave structure, heating and cooling, plumbing, storage, and stairs and how we connect spaces. They are not a black box, unless those who help make things ignore them as just a means to an end. Two dimensional reality whistles past the complexities that make buildings express all of what makes them – by giving them Order.



When Order controls the basis for Ascendance, Connection, Welcoming those “What’s” can be fully expressed. Whether linear, radial, gridded, or balanced, Order sees beyond necessity. Realizing the beauty of choreography, Order can make the expressive have depth and resonance beyond invisibility.



6) Threshold & Reward



Connection, Ascendance, Welcome, Order all facilitate “What” we make in architecture. There are ways that buildings go beyond these essentials. The unavoidable two are Thresholds & Rewards. You move into, through and around buildings. Those uses have a beginning, middle and end like all things we do.

Thresholds are inevitable and may just be a portal, unfocused beyond transition. Most doors with a building just let you in. But some thresholds mean more.



Others can mean more, they can be markers and express their own identity.



Others are just the beginning of use, either uncelebrated, or expressed.



Rewards are similar. A reward for your encounter is just a place having attention paid to its expression.



Unlike Thresholds that are scaled to the human who uses them rewards can be tiny or huge.



But put together the simple apprehension, encounter, framing, perspective, arrival path can be repeated, extended, implied, explicit, incidental, fully designed, human and social. Some are portals that offer up a promised reward.



But others are implied, part of the spaces we use.



But some buildings are a series of Thresholds & Rewards.



Some involve intentional meander and discovery.





These Thresholds & Rewards would be incidental without the intentions of Connection, Ascendance, Welcome and Order. The choreography of motivations and outcomes is the essence of everything we do. Architecture is human, so the dance is essential.



7) Balance



The ways you can listen to the possibilities in creation – Connection, Ascendance, Welcome, Order, Threshold & Reward – are fully resolved in Balance. Architects like to call this “Hierarchy” because it sounds substantial. And defines the designer as the judge of what we sadly cannot control, but desperately want to.

Balance is how we frame everything we see. We want Justice. We want Beauty. We want to Give. We want Balance – the active realization of what do not control, but is discovered in our hope and intention.

In making buildings the realizations of Connection, Ascendance, Welcome, Order, Thresholds & Rewards are just gestures without Balance.

Balance can be Symmetry. Balance can be found in the resolution of the vertical, horizontal, shapes, spaces, pattern, composition – anything we can conceive. The antithesis of Balance is random, chaotic, careless, happenstance and arbitrary contrivances of unthinking outcomes. The assumptions of “style” over listening, thought and Balance are what the built world offers to us every day.

But when we create, we can define what is being created, we can manifest our values in outcomes.

We can create Balance in that random world:



We can create Balance inside:



We create Balance outside:



We can compose to be what the inside requires and the outside sees, in Balance with each reality:



An entire building can be woven together, in Balance, inside and out:



Interiors of complex usefulness can find Balance, too:



But it is not in weighing and measuring and determining the value and outcome by our control, by ourselves. Balance is listening to the

Connection, Ascendance, Welcome, Order and Threshold & Reward that is in anything we create:



Understanding only happens when you listen. When you proclaim you cannot hear. If you only hear you, then you are just you, for you – using everything around you as yours to control. But we do not control much beyond our own hearing. When we listen, feel the values of that we do not, and cannot, know, then we can help Balance to happen:

