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LIVE PLACES: Basic Considerations

Maurice Amiel · Tuesday, March 24th, 2015

A reader's comment

I have mentioned, in my last post, the fact that a live place provided one the sense of being “aware, functional, oriented and connected,” be it spatially with respect to the physical place, and socially with respect to the occupants-users.

A keen reader, Claire, responded in a personal email to this and to other aspects of that post with a substantial comment I will quote in translation from French, and discuss it in terms of the basic considerations I wish to introduce in this post.

Claire has defined what a “live place” means to her as one *“where I experience a particular sense of well being and of belonging,”* be the place an interior or exterior one. Methinks this is a rather elegant interpretation of feeling aware, functional, oriented and connected!

She adds:

“For the moment one of these places would be my BED. Surely because of my current fatigue. Well set among pillows I read, meditate, think, phone and write in my bed. My Pad is never that far, as are books, other items ... and my husband of course.” (in English in her text)

This is a particular situation issued from exceptional circumstances, which I have observed in the case of a near term pregnant woman that had placed in her living room all the needed items, usually located on an upper floor, in order for her to rest, write, read, entertain her older son etc. all on one floor.

At the time of these observations I was doing research in view of designing a birthing room within the confines of a hospital, and we did not overlook that particular intensified and enriched relation of the woman to her immediate environment, as Claire did experience, as she combined in it elements usually found in a family room.

Claire continues:

“In my neighbourhood, you may be surprised to know, I experience a sense of belonging in the parking lot of our nearby supermarket. I have become friendly with the two attendants, one is an Albanese fellow and the other is a Bulgarian woman. Uprooted people both, but warm and helpful, with whom we exchange and find interesting complicities.”

I am not surprised, as I know how this supermarket has gone a long way to help direct its driving customers to the best parking spots depending on whether they will carry their own bags or drive to pick them up by the entry door. Attendants, in this one way loop parking lot, are indeed needed to avoid having to exit the parking lot and re-enter it from the street to pick up their bags.

We see again how a particular “functional” situation has created a context whereby help is needed for users to feel functionally oriented. Of course the sense of “belonging” to the place, mentioned by Claire, depends essentially on a particular social dynamic with the attendants. The personalities of the two attendants, together with the physical-functional particularities of the parking lot, are of course key to making this parking lot a “live place” experience provider.

I cannot stress enough the fact this social-spatial dynamic as being one, if not THE, basic consideration in understanding and appreciating the “live place” experience. (See the Discussion section of this post.)

Basic considerations to understand the working of “live places”

These considerations were clearly expressed in a seminal article by Prof. Donlyn Lyndon titled “5 WAYS TO PEOPLE PLACES” and published by *Architectural Record* in September 1975, at a time of great social-spatial environmental awareness in academia and the professions.

To paraphrase Prof. Lyndon, the heart of the matter is the presence and interaction of people rendered visible and supported by a humanly scaled physical setting.

(To wit: Claire’s examples clearly present a very human scaled setting when talking about her bed-office-library and a very helpful human presence when talking about the parking lot immigrant attendants with whom she finds common interests, as she gets to talk to them in the various steps of parking her car or picking her bags.)

So how is it that this can happen in general?

Traces and representations of people’s presence, whether of current or past occupants, that speak of how a place is used and by whom, or of how respected elements of past interior and urban spaces have been recycled ... all are essential in establishing a comforting human scale (Think of beautifully elaborated doors and windows or benches and drinking fountains, or of a recycled factory that has been part of the cityscape from time immemorial, etc.)

A little extra room made available in any setting, whether on a sidewalk or in a reception setting, for people to occupy and interact in spontaneously. (Think of the classic extra wide sidewalk, or the roof top terrace, or the pedestrian streets, etc.)

Ritual settings and occasions will certainly bind people in space and time. (Did Claire have a special day to do her shopping, that made it special for the parking lot attendants? Think of how the ordinary environment becomes sensually and socially iridescent on a date, providing places and occasions to remember.)

Proximity of different or conflicting occupancies, in housing or neighbourhood settings, can lead to lively and civil negotiations. (Think of night life on the Ramblas that kept you awake in your

hotel room while you were trying to sleep, and that made that visit to Barcelona unforgettable, or at the opposite end, think of the social anaemia of single-occupancy settings, or city districts, past their open-for-business hours.)

Pride in the production of places by revelling in well built, crafted and maintained interiors and exterior places. (Think of how that carved front door, or that oiled teak chair, can make any abode sing.)

Let us see how these basic considerations, leading to the production and experience of live places, can help us appreciate Claire's two examples of a "cold " and a "warm" place.

The case of a very "cold" Medical Research Center

According to Claire, the Medical Research Center is deemed cold for what it lacks: soul!

"It is a place without a soul. A live place is attractive and nourishes one in as much as it has a soul, human presence, a history, and movement." And she adds: *" I believe it is possible to achieve state of things even in a newly build place."*

Trying to interpret Claire's criteria for what brings soul to a place, and what kills that soul, is not difficult, and requires no photos to bring to mind such places.

To **schematize**: a building that has activity areas expressed on the exterior in terms of differentiated volumes and openings treatment speaks of human activity **occupancy** (such building has soul); a building that is essentially a simple box wrapped uniformly in glass and aluminium will speak rather of human activity **storage** (such building lacks soul) ... to wit, the brand new downtown located hospital the Research Center is part of that looks like an office building.

What Claire has noted in the Medical Research Center, without naming it, is what is called an **institutional environment** which, bound by critical considerations of security, safety and performance, will develop these grid locked reception areas, offices, labs, corridors, stairs, barely animated by a wall hung art work or well designed signs, absolutely needed to know where one is, and sometimes blessed with a window to check on the weather or a plant to share a bit of nature with, while working or waiting ... in other words environments where the worker is divested of any concern other than the task at hand, and visitors made to understand that his or her time and conduct are by necessity controlled (Remember: "You are in a hospital dear!").

This general state of things produces an insidious sense of alienation (i.e. of not belonging) that negates productive and quality involvement with others and with places. An involvement that paradoxically adds a little "noise" maybe, but that certainly adds a lot of life, and personal satisfaction: i.e. soul!

The case of a very "warm " Mexican residence

The Mexican residence in question was a new building occupied by its owner for about three months, and leased to Claire and her husband for two weeks.

Claire writes the following about the residence:

“It is beautiful, large and all white ... its architecture was informal in its organization, i.e. not symmetrical, and had an interesting mix of materials some new and some, particularly wood, were recycled. It had large window allowing generous views to the exterior with exceptionally beautiful trees, without allowing too much sun inside keeping it cool. Interior decoration was sparse and simple with colourful “jetees” thrown on seats and couches, and spaces were open to each other and well lit. All in all, however recently occupied, it already had that “soulful” quality of a warm, live place, down to holes in the screen door as trace of active use.”

Trying to interpret what Claire describes as source of “soulful warmth,” in terms of the basic considerations enumerated above we can identify:

- **the traces of use** left behind: decoration and some breakage,
- **the care taken in building materials choice:** new and recycled,
- **the openness of the plan:** allowing communication between various activities and people,
- **the articulated non symmetrical plan:** suggesting careful orientation and locating of activities in the residence for relative privacy, natural lighting, ventilation and views.

In such a setting it is not difficult to imagine: family group gatherings and rituals, as well as the use of the outside space, as complement to interior space during such activities for those seeking a place for quiet “apartés” ... and, as Claire so aptly notes, to imagine all the *movement* through that “screen door with the hole in it” brought about by an active family life!

Discussion

It is not difficult to see, given it is all out in the open, that the cooperative residential setting illustrated below has been elaborated by people for whom outdoor life is important and, just as important, the sharing of it.



Check the proximity of the flying clothes lines adding color over the gathering places; check the variety of do-it-yourself fencing and the variety of type of yard furniture; check the proximity to the street causing sometimes annoying double parking when driver and occupants of the covered outdoor area decide to shoot the breeze; check the “stuff” stored and piled on the balconies as well as the rear yard storage shack indicating a concern for the maintenance of the area.

Now, imagine the BBQ smell in the summer, the lively exchanges, the mix of generations sitting and playing around ... there you have it ... a **live place** of unmistakable quality and unforgettable character!

Photo credit Maurice Amiel

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