Modulus 20: Stewardship of the Land. Charlottesville: Modulus: The Architectural Review at the Univ. of Virginia 1991.

Frontispiece: *Byrd Mill, Louisa County, Virginia, 1740.*

Week 11

Replacement

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Architecture, whether as a town or a building, is the reconciliation of ourselves with the natural land. At the necessary juncture of culture and place, architecture seeks not only the minimal ruin of landscape but something more difficult: a replacement of what was lost with something that atones for the loss. In the best architecture this replacement is through an intensification of the place, where it emerges no worse for human intervention, where culture's shaping of the place to specific use results in a heightening of the beauty of the landscape. In these places we seem worthy of existence.

We don't know why we are here on this Earth. We do know, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated among us, that our presence here is probably harmful, an imposition. That knowledge causes us to want to assuage the fouling and killing aspects of our existence in order to simply be at some ease with our occupation. We want to belong rather than only use. Sick at killing the cow, yet having to eat, we make rules of propriety and economy governing the slaughter. We must eat the whole cow; we may not kill extra cows; we may never take pleasure in the kill. In a bare existence, economy is necessary for survival. But it is also, in any existence, an ethical act that regrets the taking; imposing itself as a respectful, if insufficient, act of atonement.

In terms of settlement, we are only comforted when we see evidence of the necessity to occupy. So we are pleased by a settlement based on cultivation where, at least to our minds, we offer the economy of cultivation as an assuagement of the inevitable destructive result of habitation. We are also pleased by deference to the landscape, in the places we refuse to occupy, the places we save from ourselves. We vacation in those places, where we have either left the Earth alone or have engaged it in a way that is satisfying, where there are the fewest needless and senseless acts to represent our being. In our towns and in our isolated buildings we search for this deference and economy. We want civilization to be a good thing. We want our habitats and artifacts to become part of the place and to substantiate our wish to belong. We want our things, like those of the civilizations we admire, to form an allegiance with the land so strong that our existence is seen as an act of adoration, not an act of ruin. We are only happy where this occurs, where we have managed to make something to replace what we have taken. Always, we must start from that initial, crucial, puzzling recognition: that we are seeking justification through deference—and failing that, through economy and respectful use. That is why farms, barns and silos always seem appropiate and beautiful. That is why we like pig pens and deplore theme parks, because it is not necessary that buildings be beautiful, but it is necessary that they be necessary.

There was a mill near my home town. It was a tall timber structure on a stone and concrete base which held the water wheel and extended to form the dam. One did not regret its being there, because it made more than itself; it made a millpond and a waterfall, creating at once stillness and velocity; it made reflections and sound. There was an unforgettable alliance of land to pond to dam to abutment to building. It was not a building simply imposed on a place; it became the place, and thereby deserved its being, an elegant offering paid for the use of a stream. Its sureness made other buildings look haphazard.

I cannot convince myself that settlement, even the most economical, the most beautiful, is better than wilderness. Even the mill is not better than no mill; but the mill is necessary for our existence, and therefore worthwhile. It is an image that keeps returning, proof that use of the Earth need not be destructive, and that architecture can be the ameliorative act by which, in thoughtfulness and carefulness, we counter the destructive effect of construction. Nothing else is architecture; all the rest is merely building.

The American landscape is being sacrificed to building. The

result is dismal, adding up to nothing satisfactory or even significant except as an accurate self-portrait of our cultural and ethical dissolution. This is an observation neither rare nor subtle. The condition is one that we all see and feel daily, one that we abhor yet perpetuate, a senseless spread of profit-motivated building that has none of the good characteristics of a settlement, and looks remarkably more like a midway, unrooted and designed to be put up anywhere. The comparison becomes more apt with the realization that most of the things built are unnecessary.

Settlement implies a benign and sympathetic occupation, the selection of a specific and favored place, and the engagement of that place to economical use; settlement is the establishment of home. Our growth is the opposite of settlement. We have forgotten the rule, that the use of a place must not be separate from the abiding in it; we are intent on uses so disrespectful and unnecessary that the place becomes unabidable.

And it is not so surprising that a culture such as ours, preoccupied with the notion of a Heaven hereafter, would abuse its landscape. How can Eden be properly cared for if it has already been abandoned for a deferred Paradise for which the Earth is a mere staging area? When a land is removed from worship it is no wonder that conscience regarding the use of that land is profoundly deficient. We have no sacred places. We have no Delphi. Where there was once spirit, in the Serpent Mound, in the kiva, there is only curiosity, the haunting relics of an Earth-bound reverence.

Nor is it surprising that a culture which has traditionally thought of the rural as good and the urban as bad would insist on populating the former until it is no longer there. We fail to recognize that cities and towns by their very conciseness and economy are great acts of conservation and deference, and that they alone offer any hope of protection of the land. We fail to realize that good cities have distinct edges, whether natural or designed, and furthermore that the placement of cities, their allegiance to the natural setting, is as important as that of the built form. Like the mill on the stream, a city must engage its place and replace loss with offering.

The sickness of the heart that I believe we all feel when we see development spreading from every town into the country is the recognition that our settlement represents not only lost nature, but lost settlement. What home have we made? Given a new world, we have let the land degenerate into real estate and architecture into style. The implication is frightening: that we don't belong here, that we are no longer of the place but on it, a lost colony in a lost paradise.

Yet that very sickness of heart and its universality is hopeful; it is what has always spurred atonement and economy. When we build, we ought not to ignore it but let it guide our efforts. We ought to keep before us the images of settlements that have successfully established a reverence for place necessary to the making of a collective home.

I like to read Thoreau, especially his chapter called Economy, because of his terrible, thoughtful struggle with the matter of building. At first he seems to be only carefully constructing a house. His consideration seems failed, doomed, artificially precious out there in the woods on that pond. But gradually I see the care with which he builds, not just a grudging, tight-fisted building, but one imbued with the most luxurious and deep images. He is not a dirt-dauber, locked only in the immutable economy of his genes, but a sentient, worried, thoughtful being, determined to be at one with his place, and not knowing how; drawing profound analogies to nature, to the elements, and to his curious earthly existence with every act of building, looking finally not for a way out of the forest, but for a way to stay there with grace. All of which is simple for the dauber, and not too hard for the primitive human mind, but extraordinarily difficult for Thoreau's great intelligence.

I think it will always be difficult to build; it should be difficult. We cannot always succeed and sometimes will not even recognize our own success or failure. But we want to stay with grace, and therefore do what we can, whether we are making a tiny house in the woods or a great city. Our gradual understanding is that we are not real colonists, with our home elsewhere. Our home is here, and what we build will be its parts. It is worth the effort to try to build well.

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