

## Twigs in the Nest

How long does it take to become acquainted with a flower? John Muir asked himself this question. His answer: perhaps an hour and sometimes a week.<sup>1</sup> To Muir, it was a privilege to be so close to nature that he learned to know it, in the same way that he knew his closest friends or family. For him, it simply took as long as was necessary. And he took the time. He became one of America's most poetic supporters of the National Parks System and without his effort, the amount of pristine lands that we enjoy today might not exist. But more importantly, his strong character and exceptional ability to bring insight to the value of nature has allowed us the opportunity to be closer to the essence of nature.

Today, we might ask ourselves the same question. With busy lives and schedules to meet, our answer would likely be very different. Today we would be pleased to spend an hour becoming acquainted with a flower, but most of us probably won't. Is it really an issue of time, or can our schedules bear the weight of a meaningful encounter with the landscape if the conditions were right? What is the difference between *being* in a landscape and truly becoming acquainted with it?

Martin Heidegger wrote of dwelling in the landscape.<sup>2</sup> He reminded us that dwelling is synergetic with building and thinking. Integral to the notion of dwelling, is the dedication to *stay*. The word *buon* means to stay in one place. Heidegger writes:

What we take under our care must be kept safe. But if dwelling preserves the fourfold, where does it keep the fourfold's essence? How do mortals make their dwelling such a preserving? Mortals would never be capable of it if dwelling were merely a staying on earth under the sky, before the divinities, among mortals. Rather,

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<sup>1</sup> Dayton Duncan, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. CD-ROM. Blu-Ray, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic writings from being and time to the task of thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1999), 325.

dwelling itself is always a staying with things.<sup>3</sup>

To *stay* implies a meaningful duration of time which encourages us to gain a more meaningful existence. When Heidegger writes about building, dwelling, thinking, he introduces the idea of *staying with things* in order to maintain access to the essence of the fourfold, or the union between the divine, the human, the earth and the sky. The tools with which a mortal can maintain connection to the fourfold is by staying with things, by caring and cultivating, by protecting and preserving that which is meaningful and poetic. In this sense, we can speculate that to stay in the landscape meaningfully, it is important to cultivate the experience, to bring into nature the tools necessary to encourage one to stay.

There is interesting research that tells us the more often a person visits a natural landscape, the more likely that person is to achieve a meaningful experience there.<sup>4</sup> To put it another way, when people do not visit nature, their perceived value of nature drops. The more people visit natural areas, the more they spiritually connect to the landscape and the particular place begins to hold meaning for them. There is also evidence concluding that the more frequently people interact with nature, on any level, the more likely they are to become stewards of the environment and take seriously the importance to cultivate, protect and nourish the landscape.<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, it is increasingly important to ask the question: What is the role of the landscape in society today? Can architecture influence a meaningful relationship

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger. *Basic writings from being and time to the task of thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1999), 329.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hughes, "Visitor Attitudes Toward a Modified Natural Attraction," *Society and Natural Resources* 16 (2003): 195.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Taylor Stein, University of Florida graduate seminar FOR 6665 course notes of author, Fall 2009.

between nature and people? The first question can be identified as one with historical significance as well as potential future implications. Throughout history, there are numerous examples of people who have considered nature a retreat, a place to get away or relax. At the top of the list is again, John Muir. Muir sought the solitude of nature as a physical need to rejuvenate; when he left for a hike, he never thought of it as “going out”, rather that he saw it as “going in”.<sup>6</sup> When Muir was in poor health, he sought the pure air of the forest. He would spend several days at a time in nature and come back with a renewed vigor. On one of Muir’s retreats, he was joined by President Teddy Roosevelt, who literally eluded his presidential entourage for a period of 3 days to simply *exist* in nature; an activity that was becoming less and less available to him as President. They spent their time watching wildlife, talking about plants and building camp together.<sup>7</sup>

Cezanne frequently retreated to the solitude of the quarry to paint his most famous works, seeking guidance from the jagged rocks to inform his brush strokes.<sup>8</sup> He found inspiration in nature, and embraced the qualities of the landscape wholeheartedly. He lived to translate those qualities into meaningful art, in a similar way that Monet concentrated on the light upon haystacks. Monet was said to have been painting not haystacks, but time.<sup>9</sup> He found inspiration in nature as well, in the complexity of light and shadow and the imperfection of time changing the face of the landscape. It is in these moments of slowness that we begin to sense the true presence of the landscape.

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<sup>6</sup> Dayton Duncan, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*. CD-ROM. Blu-Ray, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Dayton Duncan, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*. CD-ROM. Blu-Ray, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> PBS, *Cezanne in Provence*. CD-ROM. PBS Home Video, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> John Sallis, *Shades-Of Painting at the Limit (Studies of Continental Thought)* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998). University of Florida graduate seminar ARC 6357 course notes of author, Fall 2009.

Today, the call for slowness is weak, but the call for nature is growing. Nature's allure is still strong, however, the ability of the common person to engage nature has become somewhat of an arduous task. In a study that places great importance on natural areas within urban settings, Mike Houck notes that people simply do not have the vacation time and dispensable income necessary to travel to remote national parks like they used to. He calls for cities that people love, with integrated natural areas that can sustain wildlife and vegetation. He believes that we should integrate the built environment with the parks, streams and natural areas found in many urban areas. The soundscape of the city is layered with machines, cars, birdsongs and running streams. When asked if this integration is really a priority he asks "How should a child care about the extinction of a particular bird when he has never seen a wren?"<sup>10</sup> There is growing appreciation for natural areas within our reach, easily accessible and ultimately more meaningful.

Can architecture influence our relationship with nature? Many believe so, in fact, some believe that without the intervention of design, many natural areas would suffer at the hands of tourists or well-meaning nature lovers. One example is the Tree Top Walk in Australia. This heavily visited ecotourism site was extremely popular with residents and tourists alike. The area is noted for its giant tingle trees and in 1996 it was determined that visitors were having a significant negative impact on the ecosystem. An elevated walkway was designed and constructed, lifting visitors 40 meters off the forest floor, away from the tree trunks and providing them an opportunity unlike any they

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<sup>10</sup> Human Media, "Mike Houck, Urban Naturalist," Program 107:  
[http://www.humanmedia.org/catalog/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=238](http://www.humanmedia.org/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=238)

had experienced before.<sup>11</sup> The unintentional degradation of a natural area is not an uncommon situation and likewise, the development of a small section of a natural area is often planned into sites so that the tourist or recreational activities can be controlled and planned. It is important to offer opportunity for engagement in nature, for if we fenced all of the national parks, there would be no supporters to cultivate and protect the landscape. It is precisely the fact that people are invited into the site that stimulates the investment of future environmental stewardship. We must be encouraged to dwell within, we must stay, over time and be allowed to bring meaning to the places we inhabit.

With an eye toward integrating nature and the built environment, it is critical that the built form inhabiting the landscape provide a means by which our understanding of nature is illuminated. To provide an opportunity for meaning, a place to pause and dwell is essential. With this in mind, it is helpful to consider a context such as Paynes Prairie. Located within close proximity to the city, the Prairie is easily accessible. However, it is also very flat and does not engage casual observers traveling across the plain by car.

In one particular corner of the Paynes Prairie, there is a unique moment in the landscape where the water from the prairie drains deep into the aquifer called the Alachua sink. Until recently, this area was open to visitors; they moved through the landscape at will and largely uncontrolled. They could get close to the Alachua sink, though most of them came to view alligators, as this is a prime location for such an event. For safety reasons, a bridge was constructed to keep the visitors from harms

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<sup>11</sup> <sup>11</sup> Michael Hughes, "Visitor Attitudes Toward a Modified Natural Attraction," *Society and Natural Resources* 16 (2003): 193.

way. Unfortunately, this foot bridge, while undoubtedly providing a utilitarian solution to a pressing safety issue, removes the visitor both physically and mentally from the landscape.

The footbridge is an object in the landscape that visually distracts the viewer from a meaningful connection to nature. The long narrow design of the bridge encourages people to move quickly across, preventing the possibility of rest or pause. One of the main places of interest in the sink is located just east of a pair of oaks, where the tender swirling of fallen leaves goes unnoticed unless given time for the viewer to detect a slow pattern of movement in the water. This is the most unique sink in the Prairie, as it feeds into the aquifer, whereas the other sinks do not. The primary indication of this grand natural occurrence is a quiet group of leaves who speak only amongst themselves, under the force of gravity.

While the bridge does provide a place to view, the landscape itself is objectified and one's relationship with the Alachua sink becomes superficial. The experience is reduced to a quick walk, where the visitor becomes inspired to reach the *end*. In this instance, the viewer enters and leaves the landscape with the same preconceived awareness that brought them there. The setting itself is meaningless and has not had the opportunity to provide a unique experience. One could say that it lacks humanity. It lacks a connection between the landscape and the human body that moves through it in a very particular way.

The thoughtful movement of the body through space is more complex than providing a place for the feet to walk. The totality of the atmosphere of space should be

accounted for in such a place, where the mind, spirit and body are simultaneously engaged in order to form a purposeful connection.<sup>12</sup>

The perception of the visitor as they encounter the earth is dependent upon a physically activated engagement with the site and a mental provocation. Ponty reminds us how important it is to engage the environment through physical activity, that we must encourage active participation, for this brings us closer to ownership of the situation and begins the journey to meaningful existence in nature. An excerpt from Jack Reynolds regarding Ponty and his understanding of movement:

the practical modes of action of the body-subject are inseparable from the perceiving body-subject (or at least mutually informing), since it is precisely through the body that we have access to the world. Perception hence involves the perceiving subject in a situation, rather than positioning them as a spectator who has somehow abstracted themselves from the situation. There is hence an interconnection of action and perception, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "every perceptual habitually is still a motor habit"<sup>13</sup>

The Tree Top Walk gives the visitors to the forest an experience that is unlike any other by engaging their senses through movement of the body. The canopy walk is engaging and invigorating as it challenges one's perception of a forest. People subconsciously learn about tree canopies, they learn about how the underbrush of a forest has a spatial relationship with the primary trees. The role of the built intervention in this case fully encompasses education, information, spiritual awareness and natural cognition through movement.

The ability of nature to inherently reveal and conceal the view gives us one clue as to how the enduring fascination with nature that humans have maintained can persist. Through playful artistic exploration of human perception, René Magritte shows

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Hui Zou, University of Florida graduate seminar ARC 6357 course notes of author, Fall 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Reynolds, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1908-1961" *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (June 2005) <http://www.iep.utm.edu/merleau/>

us how important it is for us to be curious and to maintain the wish to see behind, to see beyond.<sup>14</sup> By a series of revealing paths that offer choices of opportunities to pause, we can encourage active participation in the landscape. By providing opportunities for watching, for waiting and for resting, the built environment can merge with the sensibility of the landscape and create a unique moment that is illuminating. How long does it take to become acquainted with a flower? The sense of time is different for everyone, but the understanding that time is a function of our perception based on our surroundings is integral to our relationship with nature. Often, time is a bystander in the moment of interaction with the landscape. It is not until we have left the site, perhaps even days later when the impact of our trip becomes relevant. It takes time to become acquainted with nature, as referred to by Muir, but it takes inherently more time to *know* nature, to *know* a place.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of this illusive concept of time and knowing:

My hold on the past and the future is precarious and my possession of my own time is always postponed until a stage when I may fully understand it, yet this stage can never be reached, since it would be one more moment bounded by the horizon of its future, and requiring in its turn, further developments in order to be understood.<sup>15</sup>

The landscape remains hidden until we approach it poetically. It is the journey of the exploration that is relevant and the realization that through the built environment we can learn more about nature than without; that architecture has a significant role in landscape today. It is the opportunity that is offered by architecture that allows nature to reveal itself.

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<sup>14</sup> Dr. Hui Zou, University of Florida graduate seminar ARC 6357 course notes of author, Fall 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Reynolds, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1908-1961" *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (June 2005) <http://www.iep.utm.edu/merleau/>