A MARKETPLACE FOR NOBLESVILLE
an exploration of experiential identity

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This book is for the love and support shown to me by my parents and family, the "people" of Noblesville, and Vicki Schauer, whose help and encouragement made it all possible.

A special thanks goes to Alvin E. Palmer for his wisdom, concern, and understanding of his students. May my parachute never open. Thanks, Sonny.
Brief

Each day we go through a complex network of experiences some special, most routine. Regardless, they do constitute our very existence. As a context to these experiences we are able to identify with particular environments. It is this phenomenon that makes our lives more enriched. This paper looks at the relationship between people and their environment. More specifically this referred to experiential identity. As a point of reference I begin with an examination of community and place from a variety of perspectives. Then it's on to a question of the age of modernism in architectural design and a more detailed explanation of this concept of experiential identity, and its implications for architectural design. As a test of these assertions I propose a unique combination of contemporary commercial retail and the traditional marketplace on a unique site in my own hometown of Noblesville, Indiana. You, the reader, a person of place, serve to judge this work. So please read on!
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Pretense

It began out of anger. I was angered by that super monument to consumer welfare—the suburban shopping mall. The curious part was that I didn’t know why. I never had any problem finding a parking space within a few steps from an entry. The variety of colors, sizes, and styles of whatever I desired from canvas tennis shoes to digital chronograph watches was always more than I could ever hope to imagine. Every floor was swept, every fixture new and bright, every display immaculate. Even with throngs of people it was spacious almost to the point of alienation. Perhaps this was the key—alienation. Without the slightest bit of warning, I found myself entrapped in a tangle web of sociological jargon. At this point I felt that my entire search for answers in some way had to deal with community and social change. The study of sociology seemed to satisfy this premise for each sociologist had an answer that was concise and distilled to a minimal vocabulary.

During the 1800’s, Ferdinand Tönnies expressed the situation in terms of “Gemeinschaft and Gessellschaft” which was roughly community and society, more accurately intimacy and indifference. This theory indicated that people of a particular locale or region were able to adhere to a particular set of beliefs and values, but in the scheme of the larger whole of society this intimate connection was impossible. In turn it was society that appears to overwhelm Tonnies’ world view. Much later, sociologist Talcott Parsons rediscovered Tönnies and during the 1940’s he reproduced his modified dichotomies in the terms of what has become known as “Pattern Variables,” a catchy title for a set of reactionary choices. Depending on where you fell within these choices of affectivity or affective neutrality, particularism or universalism, ascription or achievement, diffuseness or specificity, your place in society could be neatly determined. Sterile solutions based on a sterile premise, not a step past the clinical level. These are methods by which we are to understand community?
It is evident that most sociological thinking about community embodies a curious paradox. Statements on community assume a definite past, but are seldom genuinely historical in character. There appears to be little concern for details in the process of social change. Each expert, whether in the 1800's, 1940's, or of today, assumes the same, very simple relationship: in the past, there was community; in the present it has been lost. Social evolution has come to mean destruction of community. This is a rather closed logic resulting in an "a priori" solution to the relationship of social change to community. By ignoring the historical dimension any sociological theory, regardless of sophistication, can lose significant value as an environmental design premise.

People (particularly Americans) seem to have something else in mind when we speak of community. We tend to recall an image or an activity that is most certainly connected with a place. More important than the physical presence itself, is the expectation of a special quality of human relationship, predominately an experiential dimension. It is my contention that both community and place can be understood as a set of interrelated experiences. In these terms the parameters of the concept of community can be greatly expanded. For example, in history the traditional New England town was a community, but it was not a strict definition of the concept. Likewise, a family, a neighborhood, a group of friends, or a number of business colleagues can constitute the experiential qualities of a community without being limited by a singular structural form. It is the introduction of the notion of place that provides us with the referential connection to a meaningful concrete reality.

Community and place are distinctly intercoursed. They can be, but are not necessarily, one and the same. Regardless, they do reinforce the particular experiential qualities of one another. Both are manifest as the gathering of collective cultural values and the personal involvement of people. They are not the products of selective abstractions, but rather the interpretations of
an existing reality. The realitive success of community and place can be measured as a reflection of commitment and values of the people they serve.

By defining community as a larger physical or cultural context, the concept of place gains increased importance as a point of reference. It is a place that can in effect be the microcosm within the macrocosm of community. Through place our perception of identity and the experiences inherent to the notion of community can be more clearly understood and readily accessible. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the architect with sincere intention to provide the foundation for meaningful places; a built environment derived from the context of community on all levels and able to communicate the values and beliefs of a culture in relation to its society.
Problematic Issues

I am stranger and afraid
In a world I never made

A.E. Housman

The prophetic nature of poets is startling. Feeling alone in an alien world is now a shared emotion of every man. Since we no longer live in caves, our world is largely comprised of a built environment. It is not the only ingredient, but it is an essential one.

As of late it has been most fashionable to vindicate the Modern Movement in architecture on every level. I do not intend to continue this argument, but its influence cannot be ignored because despite the constant verbal attacks by architects and critics, the Movement lives on beneath various disguises. All of the humanizing ingredients that categorically fall under the title of Post-Modernism are usually manifest as an array of design devices that constitute meaningless symbols with no referential context for the user. To quote Peter Eisenman it becomes nothing more than "functionalism in drag."

Primarily through the age of industrial modernism we have witnessed a decline in the quality of human life and the development of a built environment that has (to a great extent) failed to respond to the needs of our time and the varied requirements of our varied context. The overwhelming result is one of displaced communities and meaningless space--placelessness (E. Relph). Paradoxically, this has been a time when the material wealth of society has an unprecedented level and the accessibility to history, knowledge, and communication has been ever-increasing exponentially. It is during the age of modernism in architecture that this abundant wealth of "all things" has been put to use to fulfill the motives of dominance, functionality, economic return, and political motives. For me this is a crisis. A crisis,
of course, is a turning point --for better or worse-- and with good intention, I am an optimist!

Certainly the notions of pragmatism cannot be totally neglected, but they should not also be isolated as the only issues for the designer's consideration. These ideas only comprise a small portion of the whole of architecture. We have seen the scenario repeatedly. Why should we continue to over-impliment and over-exploit these mundane notions? To substantiate this argument I quote SITE, Inc. architect James Wines:

Architects since the Industrial Revolution have been involved in a seemingly boundless love affair with technology, system, and service, as opposed to human energy, craft, and communication. Function, like some religious symbol, has remained unquestioned and omnipresent. A reduction of means --specifically, a less personalized craft-- has stripped twentieth century architecture of its iconographic content and, with it, the qualities of idiosyncrasy, fantasy, and the evidence of human contact. While architecture has persisted in this techno-faith, human energy and its equitable use have come to be considered fundamental ingredients in a revised hope for the future. The ranks of scientists, economists, and sociologists who still cling to the technological solutions are rapidly shrinking.

Further...
Those turn-of-the-century utopian promises that automation would free the toiling masses for a new leisure spent in self-enrichment are still woefully unfulfilled. Technology seems to have eliminated more jobs than it created, the liberty afforded by leisure has become the humiliation of unemployment and welfare, and the pursuit of enrichment is pretty much arrested at the level of television variety shows...
And at the core of this tragedy there is a basic loss of individual identity. By opting for the technologically expedient answers, architecture has encouraged the deterioration of people's pride in city, pride in domain, pride in labor, and consequently, pride in self.

Ideas, especially good ones, are difficult to come by. So when a set of broadly accepted ones, as those associated with the age of modernism in architecture, gain a foothold, it is certain that they will be well guarded against any contestant thought. Such is the plight of experiential identity—the fundamental qualities of appearance, interaction, and meaning. While in this state of crisis let us draw upon our abundance of knowledge, values, wealth, humanitarianism and the like to recognize the advantages of an architecture built upon the fundamentals of experience and memory; an architecture founded upon the phenomenology of culture with the ability to simultaneously reflect on the past, to concretize the present, and lay a foundation to fulfill the promises of a self-enriching future. To this end, architecture can once again attain its status as a truly civic art.

The civic arts are the arts of a civilization, and the arts of a civilization are the civilization itself.

W.R. Lethaby
Experiential Identity

Experiential identity is a collection of qualities that can be ascribed to a place. These qualities are evolved and unique to a particular context. Its realization can be both collective and individual in expression. Regardless, experiential identity constitutes the individual genius that says "this is a place."

The recognition of experiential identity as a fundamental premise for design has been long neglected. However it is not an entirely new notion. Prior to the age of industrial modernism, whether it was concisely acknowledged or not, experiential identity was expressively present in all architecture. It is most easily realized as vernacular, an expression that is in constant dialogue with the specific physical and cultural context from which it has evolved.

To recapture the qualities of experiential identity, we as architects must focus our attentions about a new center or paradigm. A paradigm is a broadly shared set of assumptions that govern inquiry. It is the paradigm that dictates which observations are important, which theses merit attention, and which theories hold significant content of recent. We have witnessed a change in attitude among many disciplines involved in inquiry—science, economics, and law are just a few. Let this also be so in architecture. For it is about this new paradigm that we can wholly accept the value of experiential identity.

To more fully understand the character of experiential identity, I shall break it down into what I consider its three primary components; appearance, interaction, and meaning.
Appearance

The appearance is the physical presence that allows the observer to visually articulate and associate understanding of place. This outwardly visible image permits us to make very immediate, judgemental assumptions as to what kind of reception we "might" experience.

As an implication for architectural design I paraphrase architect Robert Venturi from Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture:

Gestalt psychology maintains that context contributes meaning to a part and a change in context causes a change in meaning... The architect creates a context for parts by their organization in a whole. The use of the convention unconventionally, or the use of the familiar in an unfamiliar manner causes a change in context, hence a change in the meaning... perceptually this can allow for an identity that is simultaneously new as well as old... The architect generally selects as much as he creates.

As an architect it is of the greatest importance to be aware of that which already exists. It is apparent that the imagery should be specifically for and also about the place in which it exists. This is not to say mimick the convention, but rather transcend it into a contemporary understanding.
Interaction

Interaction is accessible to the observer in various ways. Most readily it is the observable activities in and about a place, the ability to gather people. The range of this experience can be understood from routine obligatory functions to the intimate, self-conscious participation in significant events. Culturally it can be perceived as ritual and the association with a particular place. The recognition of interaction can in effect confirm our assumptions made from appearance.

From another perspective interaction can be expressed as a matter of physical or cultural contextual agreement within a specific environment. Once again its connectedness with appearance and meaning is undeniable.

Interaction is a quality of participation. To what degree this is accepted, will greatly affect our perception of the whole of experiential identity. However, this participation cannot be forced it can only "occur" to be significant.
Meaning

Of the three aspects I have defined in the experiential identity of architecture, meaning seems to be the most elusive. This is due in great part to time, for meaning is an ever evolving and unfixed realization shaped by physical context, cultural beliefs and environment, and personal subjective response. The development of significant meaning within one’s environment demands a conscious commitment to understanding its presence. This is manifest as heritage and tradition, a set of communally held beliefs and values, indicating both collective and individual expression. By this definition it would seem obvious that the derivation of meaning is inseparable from the participation in common symbols (appearance) and common experiences (interaction).

In the final analysis it becomes very difficult to capture meaning because its relative success is dependent upon its acceptance by the individual. Therefore, the implication for the architect is insinuative, it is only with intention that he can design. The confirmation of meaning is beyond his manipulative control.
Just as place and community can be understood to be interdependent, so can those qualitative experiences associated with them be seen as inseparable. Seemingly appearance and interaction are the most accessible, but their value is only understood through meaning.

The full recognition of experiential identity will inevitably serve to generate a successful dialogue with the "genius loci," the central character or eternal spirit of a place. When architecture has no relationship with the spatial and conceptual conditions of its context, it becomes an empty gesture, devoid of meaning. The adaption to the individual genius is the acceptance of a dialogue with tradition, with historically evolved values and with their enhancement in order to form a new artistic expression.
Community of Noblesville

As a test of my assertions concerning experiential identity I propose a design project in my hometown of Noblesville, Indiana. Located in central Indiana, Noblesville is the county seat of Hamilton County. It is approximately twenty miles due north of Indianapolis, the capital of the state.

In 1823, William Conner and Josiah Polk laid out the original grid-iron plat adjacent to the east bank of the White River. Within one year Noblesville was chartered as a town. As with many mid-western towns the economy was basically agrarian. The community was able to attain an added distinction when Conner erected a grist mill upon the river. The mill sustained the town for many years and its legacy persists today as evidenced in the community mascot, the "Miller Man." 1878 marked the completion of the county courthouse and jail situated in the traditional town square, this is not unlike many other towns at this time. The courthouse remains the tallest building in the town. During the next two decades Noblesville began to shift its interests and the square became a distinctive retail area. The introduction of the railroad turned Noblesville toward industry and it was recognized for a variety of manufactured goods. By the early 1900's it was strong enough to sustain an inter-urban system that extended to Indianapolis. Noblesville continued to prosper with few exceptions, most notably the flood of 1913. Although two bridges spanned the White River all commercial development stayed to the east while the west was still agricultural. Industries continued to grow through two wars. By the early 1960's Noblesville had reached a crescendo. The entire school system had been rebuilt, commercial activity was high, and agricultural returns soared, and the county boasted of its beautiful reservoir north-west of town.
The people of Noblesville have always had a pride, there was nothing to deter this. Typically, generation after generation has continued to stay there. Farms have passed down through families and a sincere appreciation for the land has been preserved.

During the past decade, Hamilton County experienced an immense change. The farmland around the reservoir was purchased by a developer. Literally overnight a new community was built. By 1980 the size of Noblesville had doubled but the activity in the town had diminished. This new commuter culture was originally alien to the people of Noblesville. The commuter culture had a strong allegiance to the rapidly expanding Indianapolis Northside.

In the wake of Indianapolis growth, three major shopping malls were developed within a short drive of Noblesville. Soaring costs and larger corporate interests had drained all but one major industry (Firestone), and farming had begun to lose its foothold. Basically downtown Noblesville was "zapped!"

To date most attempts to preserve the downtown have been futile. Most all new development has focused on "strip" development running on the major east-west axis (Conner Street). This has made the downtown appear as a lull along the path. The traditional native of Noblesville has not been able to sustain the town.

Recently, there has been a spark of hope for the downtown. Finally, the acceptance of the two cultures by one another has produced a common interest. However, this is truly in its infancy.
Response: 
A Market "Place"

The choice of a site in Noblesville should seem obvious simply because it is the community which I am most intimately involved. However, other motives prompted my choice. I have witnessed, in my view, a negative trend in development in and about Noblesville. All new construction is located on peripheral sites and motivated by economic return, only. The growth of Indianapolis threatens to consume the identity of Noblesville which is in its path. Additionally, the town has continued to neglect one of its most outstanding features, the White River, which was the original impetus for the town's growth.

The particular site I chose is on the northwest corner of the courthouse square. The site is triangular with Logan Street as its east boundary and Eighth Street as its south boundary. The west-northwest boundary is the White River. Across the river to the northwest is a large municipal park, Forest Park, that offers golf, tennis, the largest outdoor pool in Indiana, and many other recreational opportunities. Cutting through the site is the Nickel Plate Railroad that continues through town parallel to Eighth Street.

For me, this site offered an excellent opportunity to do several things. First it is potentially a transitional link between the natural features of the park and the built environment of the town square. It is also an opportunity to re-introduce the river as an asset, not a liability. Because the Logan Street bridge (one of only two automobile links) is adjacent to the site this indicates the site as a gateway or portal to the town square.

By its adjacency to the town square this site can also be realized for its commercial value. Programmatically, my project is a combination of a farmers' market,
contemporary retail, and a variety of dining facilities. My intentions are to not only provide an outlet for local farmers, but to generate an attractive retail center for the community. The dining facilities fill current voids of lunchtime eateries as well as a distinctive nightspot.

This site is a non-traditional town block expressing three distinct planning geometries: the dominate town grid, the diagonal White River, and the penetrating automobile bridge and train bridge. These elements established the unorthodox site configuration. Responding to these geometries a number of collisions occur allowing the various components of the complex to be linked. These collisions in turn help to confirm the theme of transition. The landscaping again implies this theme. By being left in its natural state at the rivers edge then proceeding across the site into the geometry of the town’s grid to complete the corner. Vertically, the relative heights of the buildings are in reference to the adjacent context of the existing square. The entire project attempts to be in agreement with its physical and culture context, looking to what has been before, what is there now, and what could be tomorrow.
Retail Center

This portion of the complex serves as a retail base. Retail occupies the first and second levels. The uppermost level is used as a gallery and performance studio for local artists, exercise groups, etc. It is situated upon the site in the same location as the now abandoned armory. This existing infrastructure of the armory, is inadequate, but the bricks could be re-used. This building draws its orientation from the town's original grid. Its imagery is also largely dependent on the local genius. As the building proceeds upward it becomes more open around a spacious central atrium. A dialogue is created between this core and the town at its plaza entry. The tower itself serves as an inward focus for the plaza.
Axonometric - S / W Corner
Eateries & Administration

The tallest building in the complex is situated along the river's edge. The structure is a terminus to a segment of the marketplace. Programmatically, the first two levels are a daytime food court, the third is administrative and the fourth and fifth levels are a distinctive restaurant. The plaza entry is oriented with respect to the town grid and completes the containment of the plaza. Its scale is relative to that of the internal plaza. The positioning of this building allows it to recall images of the mills of yesteryear. Its outward identity is taken from that image. Additionally, its scale is such that it identifies the edge of the town and acts as a marker for incoming visitors from the west side. By penetrating the west wall with a skylight/curtain wall structure, expansive views toward the park and river are achieved.
Market & Bridge

The initial concept for the market is taken from the existing bridges. The linear paths become the cohesive thread for the variety of elements both on and off the site specific. The two wings open out toward the river to create the internal plaza. The north wing connecting link between the park and the town square. The visual impact likens to the appearance of a wall, giving another sense of definition to the town’s edge. The idea of transition is inherent to this portion of the complex. The interruption of the electrical sub-station is addressed as an adjusting deck into the plaza. This is reflected in the entry to the retail center. The circulation is defined as an enclosed loggia which can be opened up during the warmer months. This configuration promotes a leisurely stroll along the variety of seasonal foods and wares.
Elevation Detail
Reflection

Even with the knowing guidance of something as fundamentally sound as experiential identity, the realization of place cannot be a "designed" object. Place is not an object. Certainly the architect can conceive, with good intention, all of those components and amenities that have previously been successful, but this doesn't mean they will always be.

Much of twentieth-century philosophy has concerned itself with the concept of an uncontrollable destiny which has affected most other arts, and is beginning to shape the popular consensus. The architect must recognize this to realize that simply designing an environment will not protect a community's identity from destruction. This must come from people, not design. Additionally, architecture is not going to initiate social change. Social change is largely the result of political, economic, and cultural environments. However, the built environment can enhance social change, even record it as memory, and greatly affect its relative quality. This makes the argument for the recognition of experiential identity even stronger.

When responding to the individual genius two distinct "traps" are easily fallen into. First is the unconscious application of superficial historicism which leads to a false symbology. This presents a more important issue because people are more keenly aware of their own culture than they are generally given credit for. A place is its people and people are their place. Therefore, anything created by the people can just as easily be destroyed. The task of the architect is to constantly look for those things of seeming value. He must rely on a vision that is intuitive and sometimes vicarious, but honest sincerity helps.

Intellectual abstractions must cease. If a designer is to use metaphorical images, for instance, they must be of an understandable reference. If not, they become as sterile and lifeless as their illusionary premise.
The summation of this thesis harkens to a question of the role of the architect. Remembering back to my first presentation when I claimed that the architect was a mediator. Quickly, Professor Sonny Palmer, my thesis mentor, asked, "Do you really think the architect is a mediator? Wouldn't educator be a better choice?"

Sonny was correct. The architect must be aware of how to learn and how to share what he feels to know. Whether he is agreed with or disagreed with is of little consequence. It is the dialogue that promotes interaction and substantive value.

In a round about way I've come to at least one strong conclusion. Architects and their architecture can no longer afford to be pompous and self-righteous. Architecture is for people and our environment. Those same people have every right to be critical and judgemental for without the consideration of people there would be no discipline of architecture.
Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought and quaint expression are as near to us as any, and if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habits and form of government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
"Self-Reliance"
References


