



CRESCENT CITY SENSE OF PLACE AND A NEW DESIGN ECOLOGY

An autoethnographic exploration of identity, place and graphic design



Susan E. Matherne



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Crescent City Sense of Place and a New Design Ecology @ Susan Matherne 2020.

“The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a preexisting being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a preexisting truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.”

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Graphic Design in the Graphic Design Program at Vermont College of Fine Arts, Montpelier, Vermont.
By Susan Matherne | October 2020

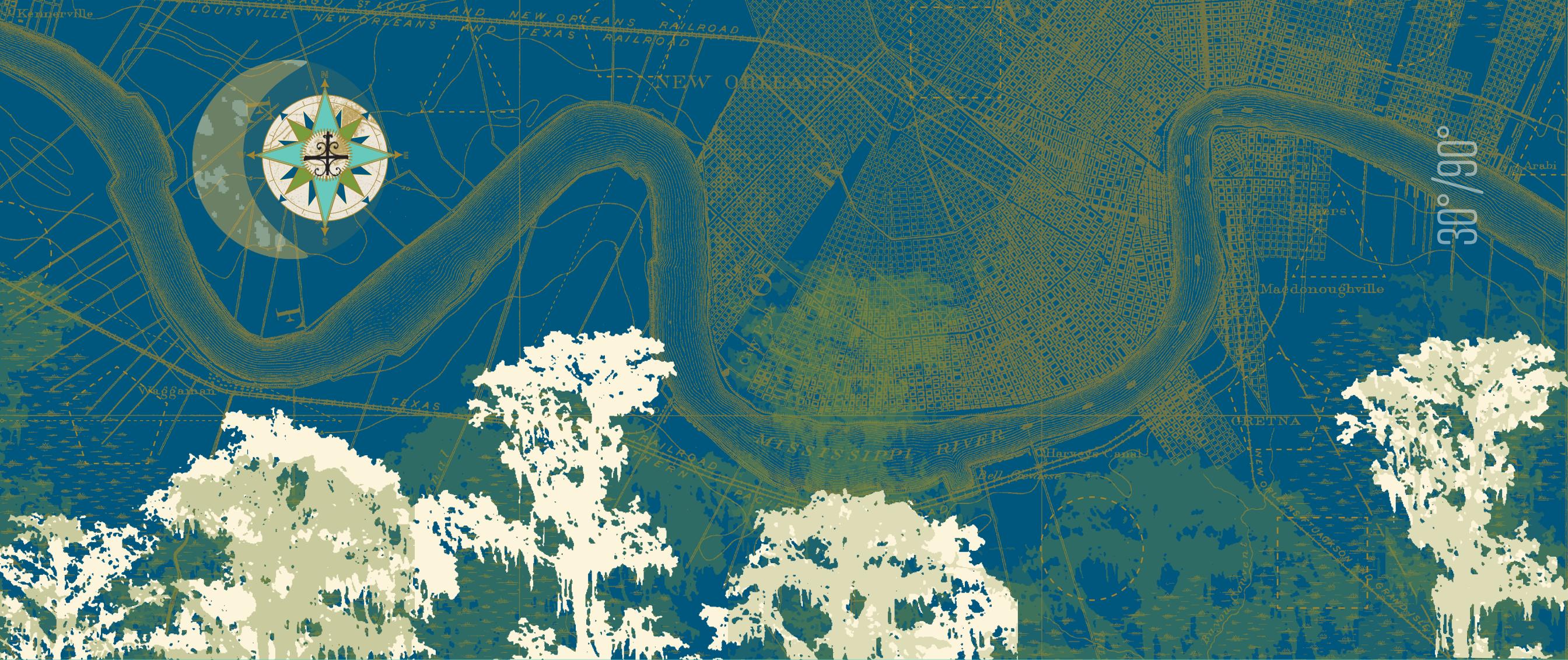
David Schatz

Natalia Ilyin

Lorena Howard-Sheridan

Silas Munro

This thesis is dedicated to my mom Marlene, my dad Billy, and my brother Mark.



30°/90°

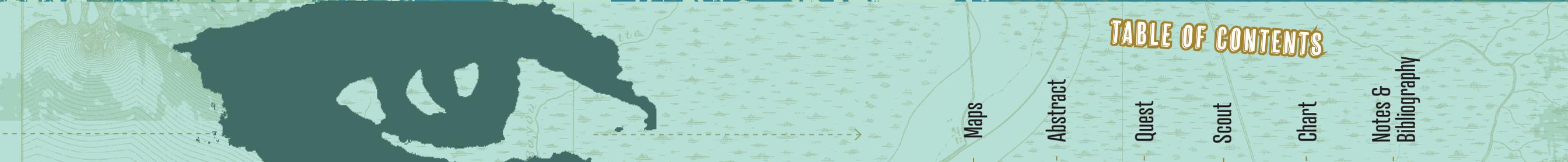


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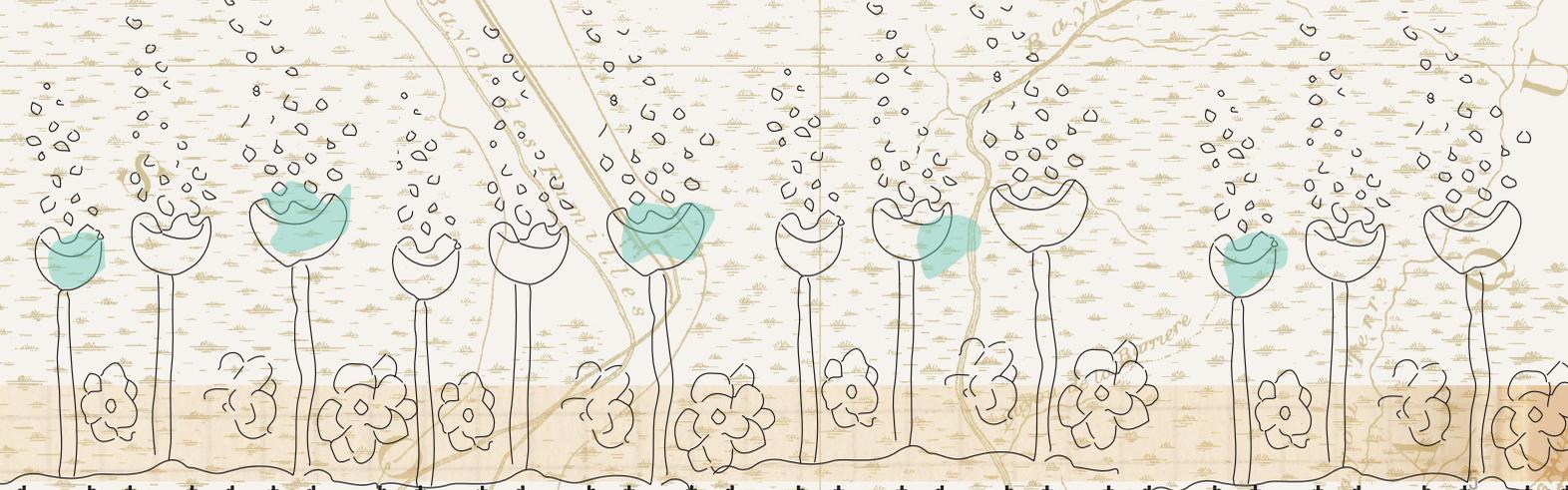
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LEGEND

Sense of Place Design
Ecology: Foundations,
Principles, Theory,
Methodology, and
Conceptual Framework.
Keys contain signs, symbols,
graphics, and other visuals.

KEYS

- Vernacular
- Nature
- Food

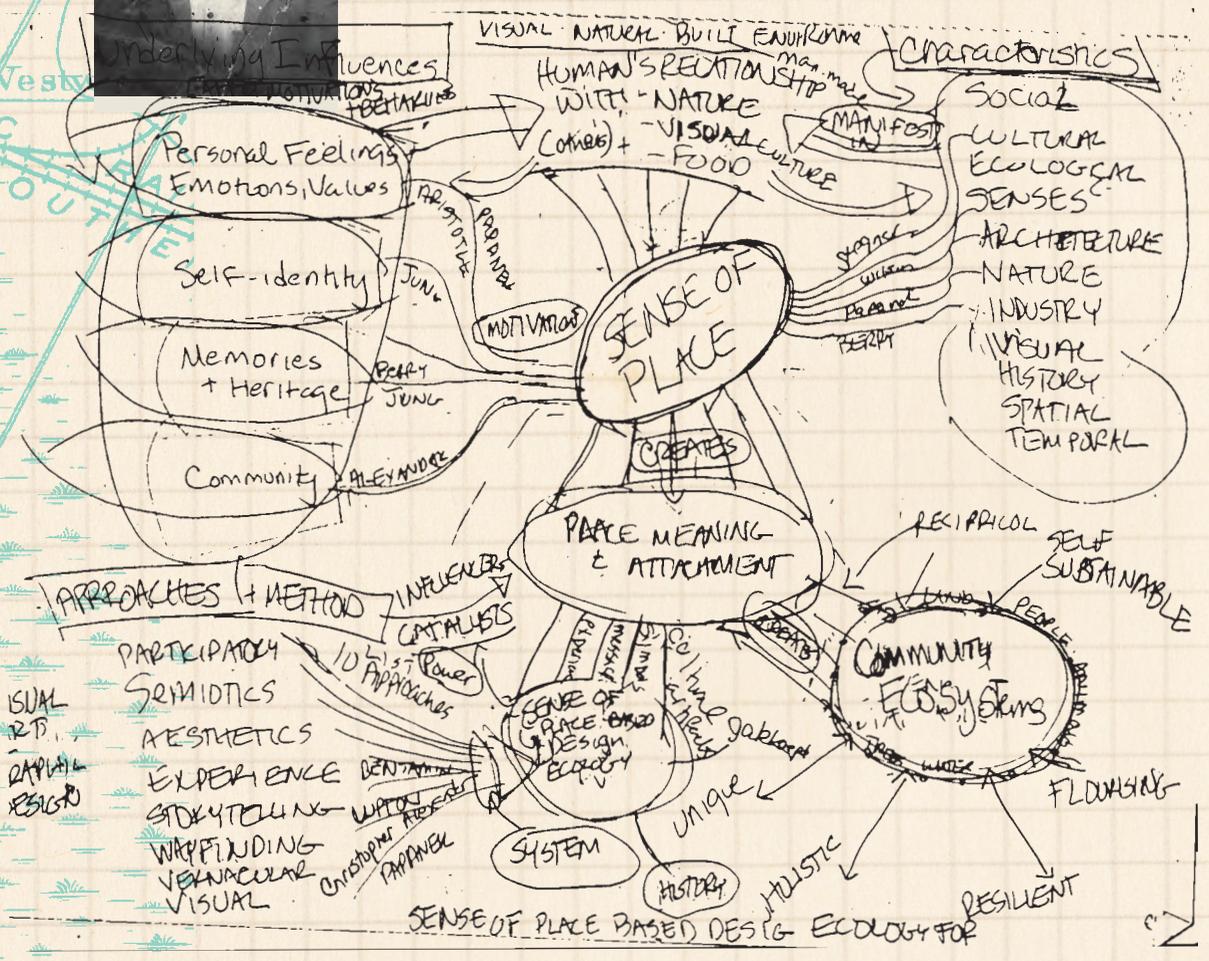




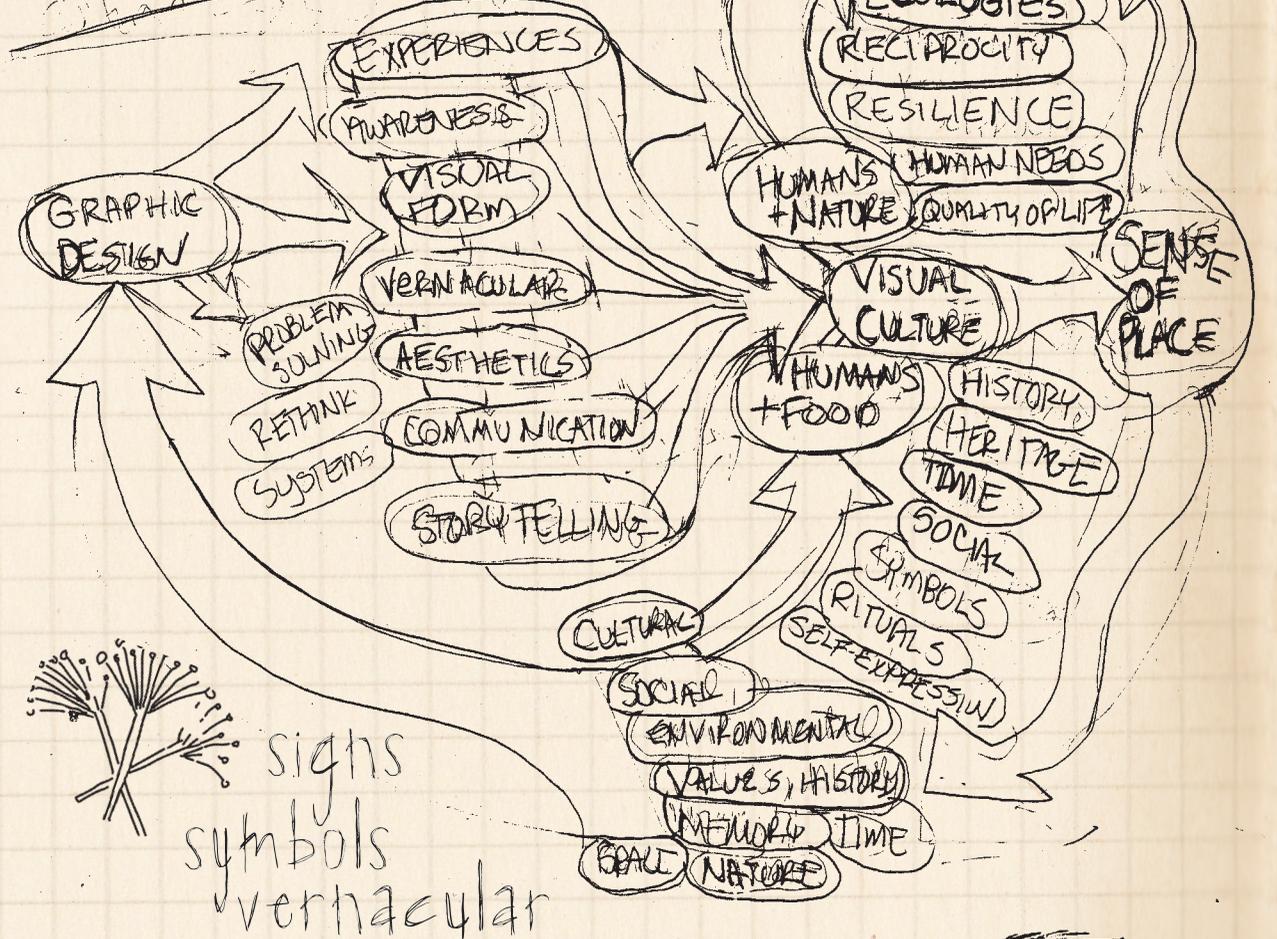
experience

material

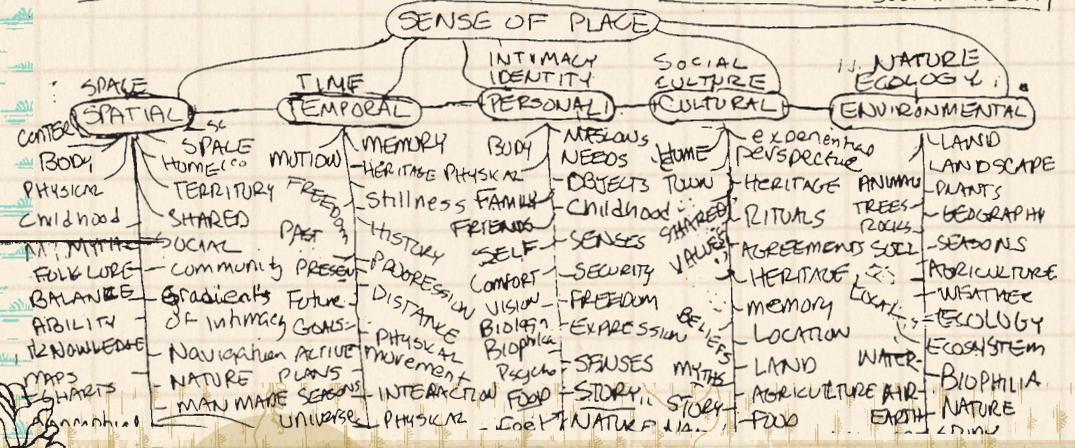
visual



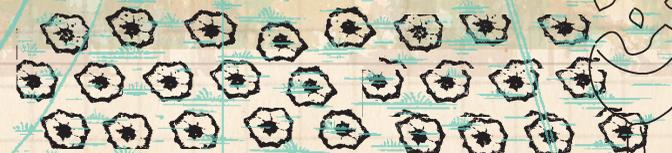
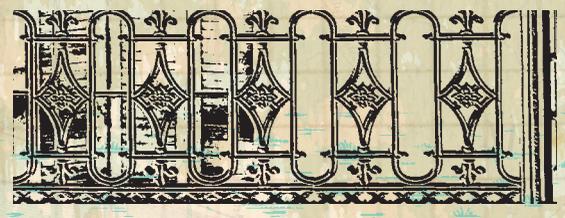
Graphic Design's Role + Relationship IN SENSE OF PLACE.



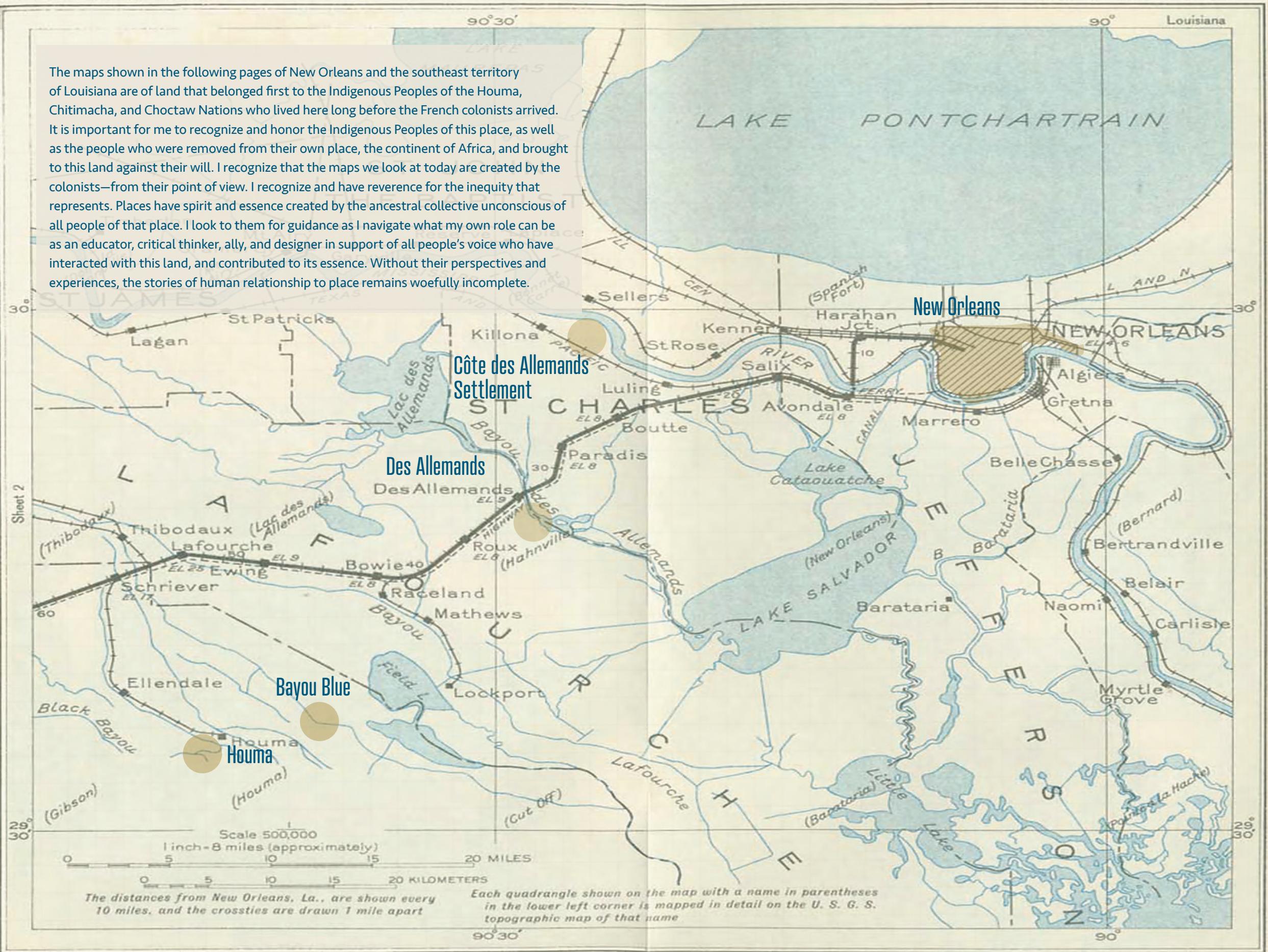
HUMAN NEEDS · HOLISTIC COMMUNITIES · ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY



sights
symbols
vernacular



The maps shown in the following pages of New Orleans and the southeast territory of Louisiana are of land that belonged first to the Indigenous Peoples of the Houma, Chitimacha, and Choctaw Nations who lived here long before the French colonists arrived. It is important for me to recognize and honor the Indigenous Peoples of this place, as well as the people who were removed from their own place, the continent of Africa, and brought to this land against their will. I recognize that the maps we look at today are created by the colonists—from their point of view. I recognize and have reverence for the inequity that represents. Places have spirit and essence created by the ancestral collective unconscious of all people of that place. I look to them for guidance as I navigate what my own role can be as an educator, critical thinker, ally, and designer in support of all people's voice who have interacted with this land, and contributed to its essence. Without their perspectives and experiences, the stories of human relationship to place remains woefully incomplete.



HOW MIGHT WE RETHINK GRAPHIC DESIGN BY EXPLORING OUR OWN SENSE OF PLACE?



HOW MIGHT WE RETHINK OUR OWN SENSE OF PLACE BY EXPLORING GRAPHIC DESIGN?

The more human civilization advances intellectually and physically, the more design has become imprinted into our way of life. Design is not just the ink used to draw the map of modern human experience, it has become the map. At this pinnacle of human advancement outward, the ink fades on another map—a map charting the pathways to a sense of place. Sense of place is influenced by the natural environment, human activities and interaction, but also perceptions, senses and sensations. The bond humans develop with place influences identity, stewardship, culture, and even survival—making it one of the most profound aspects of human experience. What kind of imprint does design make to this map? How might we rethink design as a gateway to access this inner territory? How might we rethink sense of place by exploring it with a design mind?

How might we rethink design by exploring sense of place?

Using an autoethnographic research method, this thesis embarks on a quest to examine the phenomenology of sense of place. The physical landscapes of New Orleans and southeast Louisiana are explored as a portal for rethinking identity, design and the essence of sense of place at the triadic intersection of humans, culture, and nature. The visual, material, environmental, and experiential elements of place yield a vocabulary of signs, objects, visibility, and materiality which culminates into a semiotics of place representing relationships between identity, culture and physical surroundings. Navigation for this journey is informed by theories of philosophy, phenomenology, ontology, psychology, environmental science, anthropology, architecture, physics, metaphysics, and the juxtaposition between theories of the collective unconscious and consciousness. These pathways yield new ways of thinking about the roles of perceptions, experiences, seen and unseen nature, and visual culture—and how they culminate to creating place meaning.

What was at the start a journey for ways in which graphic design can be a catalyst for facilitating a sense of place, an additional discovery is found. Connecting with one's own sense of place facilitates rethinking graphic design. Design is reimaged through ontological, phenomenological, and semiotic approaches. Built from foundations, principles and elements gathered from the exploration, a sense of place design ecology emerges with a theory, methodology, and framework not only for rethinking design as a catalyst for sense of place, but as a larger paradigm shift for philosophically rethinking design on a fundamental level.



Exploring the relationship between identity, place and design.

“Thunder is no longer the voice of a god, nor lightening his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree means a man’s life, no snake is the embodiment of wisdom, and no mountain still harbors a great demon. Neither do things speak to him nor can he speak to things like stones, springs, plants, and animals. He no longer has a bush-soul identifying him with a wild animal... his immediate communication with nature is gone, and the emotional energy it generated has sunk into the unconscious.”

— Carl Jung, *Collected Works*

Signs and Synchronicity

Psychologist Carl Jung wrote extensively about the human relationship with physical surroundings throughout his career, specifically about nature. Editor Meredith Sabini shares Jung’s writing in her book *The Nature Has A Soul: Carl Jung on Nature, Technology & Modern Life*. Jung writes “Nature is not just matter, she is also spirit. Were that not so, the only source of spirit would be human reason. The natural spirit, whose strange and significant workings we can observe in the manifestations of the unconscious, now that psychological research has come to realize that the unconscious is not just the ‘subconscious’ appendage or the dustbin of consciousness, but an autonomous psychic system.”¹ Matter is the tangible exterior of things. Spirit is the non-visible interior. Together, they make up the qualities of the world that can only be partially understood. Matter and spirit combine to communicate with us in a graphic language of sign, symbol, and synchronicity. Because humans are no longer involved in nature, and have lost what Jung calls ‘emotional participation’ in nature. The emotional energy and meaning it generates has sunk into the unconscious, along with humans’ nature spirit and our relationship with physical surroundings.

Jung asserts that modern man has lost the ability to speak this language. The result has been a loss of instincts, and a ‘sense of cosmic and social isolation.’ I wondered not only about the larger consequences of this lost ability, but specifically how it affects sense of place overall, and even more specifically how graphic design involved. I contemplated the juxtaposition of matter and spirit, and how modern man’s obsession with matter has in fact pulled us away from the nature and spirit of the world. From the start of my thesis, even my graduate studies, I had the notion this was the general area I wanted to explore. But the territory that lay before me is vast and complex. Still, there were many occurrences that happened along the way that were so meaningfully connected which came across my path at just the right time. There was a synchronicity at work, so I kept digging, reassured to some degree that this was a pursuit of some value. I set an intention to pay attention

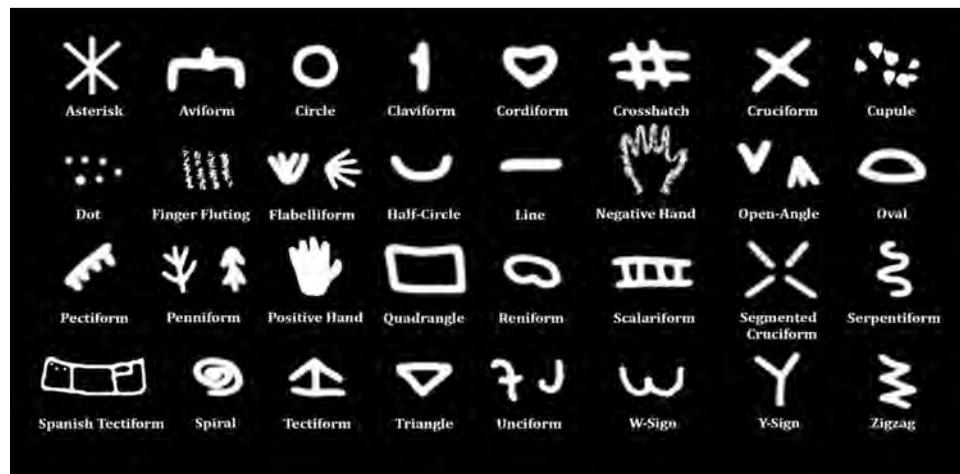
Checkpoint Charlie’s Bar is on Esplanade Avenue at the edge of the French Quarter.



to any signs and synchronicities that might be speaking to me. Sign number one came in the form of a book about signs. At the beginning of my graduate studies, I made a list of topics that might interest me. The list included subjects signs and symbols, visual culture, visual literacy, and design anthropology.

I didn't share this list with anyone, nor did I start any research on them. At this same time, I came across archaeologist Genevieve Von Petzinger's book *The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols*, which had recently been republished in paperback. I found her, and her book, sheerly by coincidence while reading a national geographic article by way of an email news subscription. At that time I knew a little about the anthropological study of early humans' visual language. I've always been fascinated by the Ice Age cave drawings, and understood that they were of course graphic communication, but as soon as I started reading this book, something new clicked. There was something more to these marks ²

These signs and symbols revealed an understanding about what Jung refers to in his writing about humans' connection to the spirit of the natural world. There is a subtext of meaning beyond the primary messages. In *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Jung and his colleagues discuss how signs were among the first visual reflections of humans connecting place to their identity, often by way of visually contextualizing and re-contextualizing nature, cultural values, beliefs and their sense of the physical environment around them. There is even evidence of early humans using visual symbols and images of nature for deepening their bond with their environment through the 'unseen' world by "entering altered states of consciousness then reproducing entropic visions in their art."³



Von Petzinger's 32 signs she has cataloged from her discoveries of Ice Age locations across Europe and Africa. They account for the vast majority of non-figurative imagery found across the continent during this 30,000-year time span, suggesting that they were used with purpose and were meaningful to their creators. Each of the 32 signs has their own distinct pattern of use. One of Von Petzinger's other revelations is that many of the graphic signs and symbols were already being used before Ice Age man got to Europe, in Africa, meaning that early man was using visual art to communicate much earlier than previously known.



These European marks were made between 10,000 to 40,000 years ago, during the Upper Paleolithic period of the Ice Age. Von Petzinger has researched their origin farther into early's mans history with their origins coming from Africa. *Clockwise from top left*: A negative hand, one of the oldest types of imagery in the world, was found in El Castillo. Negative hands were often made using a spit-painting technique in which someone would place their hand on the cave wall and "spit" paint over and around the hand, leaving an outline. Also found in El Castill is a chamber with Spanish tectiforms (meaning "roof-shaped") made with red ochre. The tectiform signs are large—many of them are two to three feet in length. The large groupings of red dots in the form of rows or circular patterns seem to appear most often in northern Spain. The Las Chimeneas cave in northern Spain shows a tectiform sign (bottom left), a local version of the tectiform sign. This Spanish tectiform is indigenous to northern Spain, and it's been hypothesized to be a representation of a Paleolithic dwelling or a boat, or could be a more abstract interpretation of a local clan or tribal sign. The "La Pasiega Inscription" (16,000 years ago), a remarkable series of signs strung together—is a rarity in Ice Age art. While this isn't "writing" as we know it today, it is possibly a very early attempt at creating a more complex message using multiple signs. ⁴

Photos and graphic courtesy of Dillon von Petzinger, and reprinted from "What can the mysterious symbols made by early humans can teach us about how we evolved?"https://ideas.ted.com. Patrick D'Arcy, June 7, 2017.



Farm house in Maine.

Signs are inherently imbued with place meaning, and place identity. Their visual art and language has connection to the collective unconscious and concept of ‘the self’ through archetypes of culture and nature. Learning more about these first graphic communications revealed to me the human instinct to express place and their connection to it with graphic communication. They reveal human instinct for place identity and place meaning—the beginnings of graphic communication as visual culture. They prove how far back humans recognized their own intrinsic and vital relationship between themselves and nature. As David Abram confirms in his book *Spell of the Sensuous*, this communication seems to come from a place of deep human instinct written over thousands of years.⁴ What’s more, that connection includes a relationship to the body and our biophysical relationship to space, and subsequently place.

There is a physics and metaphysics related to this communication revealed in shape, pattern, ratio, line, and color choices which all had meaning that was sometimes consciously manifested and sometimes unconsciously manifested. Either way, it was all influenced by connected and relationship to the surrounding natural environment. This early visual communication was not just denotative, as in ‘here are graphic instructions on how to kill an animal’. It communicates a symbolic connotation—meaning beyond figurative representation—as in ‘animals are important to us, we are connected to them in some way.’ There is strong evidence pointing to the presence of spatial awareness in these graphic communications as well, shown by mapping landscape and evolved thinking. Scholars don’t yet know what all of the graphic signs mean, or exactly what the larger messages are that these early humans were communicating by stringing multiple signs together. There is speculation that it is a kind of sign language, a hieroglyphic



language where the marks work together in a system. This would be monumental. Old Egyptian hieroglyphs date back to around 4000 to 3000 BC. These Ice Age signs are from 20,000-40,000 years ago. It’s like finding a cell phone next to the bones of a fossilized dinosaur. Even more incredibly, Von Petzinger explores use of abstract, non-figurative signs to trigger memory cues (and therefore deeper meaning through recall and learning) relating to experiences in their places. An acknowledgment to place and placeness had a lot to do with this type of communication. Whether a writing system as we would think of it or not, these signs which were once considered prehistoric ornamentation, or decorative wall illustrations, are now known to be some kind of systematic, symbolic graphic language. Early humans revealing how important art and aesthetics were to their quality of life is pretty groundbreaking in and of itself, but now scholars realize there was also an entire visual language ripe going on with communication and meaning. Even more incredible, is the possibility these marks were part of a system.

Von Petzinger shared in an article written by Patrick D’Arcy around the time her book and her Tedtalk came out, that “geometric signs outnumber representational images in caves by at least two to one.”⁵ She hypothesizes that “some of these signs could potentially be part of a larger system that they brought with them when they left Africa,” Von Petzinger says, “and then moved with them as they spread across the world.”⁶ These findings lead to many more questions, but what they reveal is truly groundbreaking within the world of graphic language and human development.

Sign number two was an unexpected cross country road trip I took to help my brother move from Bangor to Omaha. I flew from New Orleans to Boston, drove a rented SUV from Boston to Bangor, and then drove from Bangor to Omaha. By driving, I had the opportunity to get outside of my own place and see places in a way that I hadn’t been afforded in a long time. This got me thinking about the influences of natural surroundings, and the spatial, environmental, visual, and material aspects in relationship with place. This led to thinking about the semiotics of a place. I documented as many signs, icons, artifacts, symbols, vernacular typography, and distinguishing visuals of the places as I could, while still sticking to the time frame of making over 2000 miles in four days.

Driving through towns and landscapes, I watched visual language of places pass by my windshield. Some you can get a better ‘sense’ for than others. What is around me that visually communicates to me where I am? What is there around me that tells me who these people are and what they do and care about? I flew home filled with an urgency to take a deeper look at my own place in the same way I was examining the towns I drove through—to really examine the visuality and semiotic messages of what’s around me and how that informs my sense of place. Sign number three was hanging there as I walked across the airport baggage claim. “Welcome to New Orleans! Celebrating Our 300-Year Anniversary! 1718-2018.” I thought about how long a period of time that is, and all the changes to our city and advancements in the world since 1718. I counted markers in my own history with my

city since I was born in New Orleans. What seems like a long time for me is minuscule in comparison to the age of the city and all the changes it has gone through and the historic events it has witnessed. This got me thinking about the role of *temporality* in culture and place, and how it influences the visuality, objects, traditions, rituals, materiality, the way humans connect with place as part of daily life and ways of being.

I set out to look for these influences, to observe, record and document them as part of research. In doing so, I found sign number four. I saw something happening in my city that I have seen happen to other places, but hadn't really seen much of in my place until recently. It started after Hurricane Katrina. With so much destroyed, national and international brands saw a long awaited opportunity to swoop in and grab land and market share. It was a slow trickle at first.

Historically, New Orleans' residents haven't been all that welcoming to national chain businesses coming in and delocalizing the business landscape. I knew we were in the midst of a fundamental transition when Costco opened on Claiborne Avenue across the street from Xavier University, which is within eyesight of the city's historic quarter. Eventually, a couple strip malls were built on North Carrollton with a Pink Berry, a CVS pharmacy, a Petsmart and other national chain businesses. This may sound mundane to some, but to many of us in this area of New Orleans, it is a notable occurrence.

The temptation to be part of national consumerism has become too great a force to keep at bay. The influx of new residents from other places that already have these national chains has been an influence in tipping the scales towards increasing acceptance of this infiltration. Like water boiling over a pot, it happens slowly at first, then speeds up until it becomes somewhat unstoppable. I realized I am bearing witness to a shift towards globalization, centralization, homogenization, and gentrification that is also accompanied by an existential transformation of my place, and with that a change in culture. And yes, loss of connection to the natural surroundings does have to do with something or maybe a lot do with it. Not in an obvious sense at first, but having to do with local knowledge and reverence with the local natural surroundings. I began to think about how this affects visual culture, and how it shifts the general visuality and materiality of a place.

This shift is not academic nor theoretical. I don't have to turn on the television to see the destruction of land and natural resources. I don't have to read about an international industrial chemical plant in some far away place, decimating green space and wildlife habitat by spewing poisonous gases into the air and water. I am witness to these in real time. Even historic buildings and spaces are succumbing, which is something I never thought I would see in New Orleans. One example is the Hard Rock Hotel which was to be a newly constructed building planned for a very tight lot site on the edge of the historically protected French Quarter. Because the entire area of the original Vieux Carré is a historic district, a commission controls much of what can and can't be done in the French Quarter with regard to buildings. They even regulate what color owners can paint



Driving across country from Maine to Nebraska, I documented signs, icons and symbols along the way as well as vernacular signs and imagery. I looked for classifications such as human form, animal, similarities in graphic elements, those that are recognized nationally and regionally understood. For example, even a pink mid-20th century Cadillac is a symbol that communicates a message to a certain audience. It speaks to the style of this restaurant and the kind of food one might expect. Even those that don't know the implicit message, can feel a sense of it. One notable discovery was that I found far more relying on letterform rather than pure imagery or abstract graphic marks and design, although I wasn't able to venture off the interstate as much as I wanted due to time constraints. As part of my visual exploration and research that semester, I began creating a taxonomy and typology of what I had collected. As on the outcomes of this thesis, I hope to continue design and semiotic comparisons, classifications, and investigations on an ongoing basis.

their homes. However this plot of land is just outside the line of that jurisdiction. Before it could be completed, the Hard Rock building collapsed due to improper construction and improperly approved permits. Workers were injured, and several died. Bodies weren't even recovered from the collapse until over six months later. Several older buildings surrounding had to be destroyed so the building can be demolished. Aside from failed construction of the Hard Rock, this is the most aggressive attempt yet to encroach upon the French Quarter with this type of building, and people died because of it. This building had no advanced water run-off management contingent as part of its planning, which is significant for our city. As a matter of standard, New Orleans' local culture has always had a strong reverence for history, heritage and even the natural world as part of our socio-cultural ways of being and living. Making a living off sea and land directly is still a big part of life in this place. However there is immense societal pressure



to abandon stewardship of these, and let these temporal and cultural connections fade—a push more acceptance of homogenization. I say push because it doesn't feel like an organic transformation pulling us towards something. It feels like a push evidenced by the changing visual and material culture. This got me thinking about the importance of *visuality and materiality* of place, opening up a treasure trove of deeper inquiry. If humans don't see themselves, their culture, their own visuality, materiality, temporality and other identifying elements reflected back in their own place, how does place identity happen? How is sense of place affected? Why would they care about it? What makes someone care? How are people reflected in their place? How does design influence ways of living and being that reinforce a sense of place? I was drawn to this intersection of history, culture, land, people, symbolic language.

I found a kindred spirit when I came upon Lucy Lippard and her book *The Lure of the Local*, from which I have so greatly been inspired. As a person who feels a deep and profound lure of the local that Lippard describes, I wanted to explore and chart paths for design to be involved in place, even sense of place, to provide a framework for myself, and as method and a tool to engage other designers in discourse, education and practice where place intersects with design. As Lippard writes, “These days the notion of the local is attractive to many who never really experienced it, who may or may not be willing take the responsibility and study the local knowledge that distinguishes every place from every other place.”⁸

We experience our place, and the world, from our own personal experience—an autoethnographic perspective. However, I wanted my investigation to also include thoughts, philosophies, approaches and science of others related to aspects of place. Not just those of designers, but those mostly outside of the design discipline I sought out theorists, philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists and other scholars: Harold Proshansky, Wendell Berry, Fritjof Capra, Arturo Escobar, Aldo Leopold, and Yi-Fu Taun, Gaston Bachelard, and many others. I did seek the counsel of some design, visual culture, and other design-related scholars like Victor Papanek, David Orr, and Lucy Lippard, Maggie Macnab, Ellen Lupton, among others.

I came to think of these scholars and thinkers as guiding stars in the sky. I didn't see the constellations all at once. Instead I would find one star, then another, and another until constellations and guidance unfolded a little at a time. I also sought counsel and insight, as part of my local observation and participatory research. These stewards of place included Kevin McCaffery, food and cultural documentary filmmaker; Dr. Bob Thomas, Loyola University professor and environmental scientist.

My connection to Dr. Thomas led me to enroll in his Environmental Communication Institute course at Loyola where I met other participants, many of them scientists. I also traveled to Connecticut in 2018 and presented my research as a speaker at the National Ephemera Society Conference which introduced me to an array of other people interested



Lagers International Grill and Ale House, an English-style inspired pub and grill owned by locals stood for 22 years on the corner of Veterans and Severn Blvd. in Metairie, a suburb just outside New Orleans city limits. However, there has been a surge of national chains opening in this suburb of New Orleans, and recently the international brand Shake Shack set its sights on conquering New Orleans.

The chain has opened up three locations in addition to opening a restaurant inside the newly-built airport. Shake Shack's own marketing pitch states that it is a “modern day roadside burger stand.” They want to be known for their custards and shakes too. They claim to have gotten their start as a hot dog cart in Madison Square in Manhattan. They certainly got the modern part right, and the visual system is tightly packaged. As contemporary branding dogma dictates, every single one around the world is a carbon copy.

On the other hand, their own history and heritage gets lost somewhere in their messaging. We are left with something that doesn't symbolize them, doesn't symbolize us, this place or any place really, and communication that does not provides for any sense of place whatsoever. Are brands the new places? People flocked to the opening of this one in Metairie. Free food was involved. Meanwhile, the owners of Lager's were searching for a new location to reopen before COVID-19 virus hit the city. They also own another English pub, The Bulldog, with several locations still in business, which will hopefully weather being shuttered for so long.





This Hard Rock Hotel, located on the edge of the French Quarter on the corner of historic Canal and Rampart Streets, injured several and killed three workers when it collapsed while still under construction. Ten months later two bodies were still trapped inside. The 18-story building was conceived with a footprint that barely squeezed inside the lot site, no water run-off mitigation system, and a boundary of only a couple feet between building's edge and streets' curbs. This historic site is the location of the former Woolworth Department Store, which was the location of the first sit-in to protest segregation in the city's stores and restaurants in September 1960, and the site of multiple protests and sit-ins after that.

Originally the new construction was meant to be a \$70 million luxury apartment complex which has been the new trend downtown—building luxury apartments that barely anyone who actually lives and works in New Orleans full-time can afford. This project sparked controversy when its principle manager was convicted of stealing recovery funds after Hurricane Katrina. It was then slated to become the national chain hotel.

Once the building is demolished and some time has passed, perhaps the site could be turned into a park honoring its significance as a historic site of the civil rights movement. It could provide a green space where visitors could rest, watch the streetcars and people go by while they read and reflect on the significant events that took place in this spot in the city.



A 300-year anniversary sign was erected by the city in various parts around town. At first, residents and tourists flocked to it at night like termites to a street lamp in May. It lost its allure fairly quickly. The slight embellishment of the '3' gives a subtle nod to that of wrought iron, but one has to really want to see it. It was a missed opportunity for the city to create some kind of graphic communication with actual connection to the senses and sense of place.

in how society and culture are represented visually throughout history and in relation to place, including how culture connects and represents nature visually. I spoke with numerous other local stewards of my own place where culture meets nature: musicians, artists, writers, farmers, shrimpers, and fishermen.

The culture of New Orleans is inherently historically-minded. We are sentimental, nostalgic community. We live out our history. We are immersed in it through our music, events, and events steeped in tradition. It is part of our daily lives and our nature of being. However, through my own autoethnographic research, first person histories and interviews, deeper field research confirmed for me a sense of place is not just a an indulgence into romanticism or nostalgia. It is a necessary socio-ecological dynamic, with very real influences on sense of self, identity, and community resilience and functioning. Our relationships, quality of life, and even a city's economy rely on the community having a strong and healthy sense of place. But before getting into the weeds of building awareness, value, behaviors and actions to support that fact, there has to be true understanding of what creates sense of place and what detracts from it. This centers on things like meaning, feelings, memories, and relationships. These are



are overcome. New insight is discovered. Perceptions change, or new ways of thinking are discovered. A new sense of purpose is gained. Though a particular way of seeing an outward landscape through inward approach and perspective, a new way of thinking about connections between identity, design, and place is found. In this respect, this exploration is more *vision quest* than conquest.

The Scout section introduces the approaches for rethinking design. It lays out the larger pathways for *how* the navigation will be approached— through phenomenological, ontological and semiotic approaches, which open up ways of seeing, conceptualizing, visualizing, and rethinking.

The Chart section provides the territorial subject matter This is the *what* part of the journey. It is divided into the three main areas, or requirements, for sense of place: humans, culture and nature. They are each systems in their own right, but together they form a larger interconnected system. They provide the main structural framework of the sense of place design ecology. As the exploration navigates this territory through these three approaches, it makes side trips into physics, metaphysics, systems thinking, psychology, biophilia, and other conceptual territories as ways to think about culture, nature, and sense of self. Charts and maps need legends to further explain the context, or provide more information for understanding it. The Legend section in this book discusses design's role and relationship in the sense of place based design ecology, including the identification of foundations, principles, audiences, and motivations. It culminates in a synopsis of the sense of place design ecology including the framework that conceptualizes it. Maps and charts often include keys which are symbols, graphic marks and/or colors to represent specific objects, areas, and points of interest which help draw attention and enhance meaning and context.

The Keys section represent the visual research I did throughout my studies which informed the development of the design ecology. They don't include an exhaustive documentation, however, they provide a general idea of visual research's focus. They follow the autoethnographic and phenomenological, and ontological method of this thesis. These Keys are notable on their own, but even more so as a group because they interconnect with each other. As visual research, they represent research into design, about design, and through design. Visuals from the keys are used throughout this book, much as they would be in the actual design of a map or chart. The keys serve as the graphic, symbolic, semiotic language of this exploration, and serve as the beginnings of a visual language system for future design. Investigating these key subjects as part of visual research has provided me with a deeper understanding of my own sense of place and of the subjects. They also have unlocked a method for rethinking design in and of itself, aside from application towards sense of place. There is much more territory to be explored within these three landmarks of vernacular, nature, and food systems as pathways to support connections of sense of place. There is so many other areas still to be discovered.



A Paradigm Shift

Designers are often taught in design schools that design is not art. A statement that is predicated on an agreed upon definition for art. What are art's limitations and purpose? Is art's only purpose for purely visual aesthetic or beauty? (Not that there is anything wrong with that.) Doesn't art serve other purposes within society and culture? In Carl Jung's *Man and His Symbols* (1964), his colleague Aniela Jaffé writes that "it is psychological fact an artist gives form to the nature and values of his time, which in turn forms him."¹⁰

What is design's purpose in society and culture? In the 21st Century, has the role of design not also become to give form to the nature and values of our time? Design is problem solving. It seeks an objective. Design controls, shapes and forms. In these processes and outcomes, whether deliberately or as an unintended consequence, doesn't design give form to the nature and values of our time? The ontology of design today is as influencer and reflection. It is both instrument and spokesman of the spirit of our age. Do these forms not shape perceptions that lead to shaping the realities of others as well as ourselves?

Who we are as creates what we make. What we create makes us who we are.

Our humanity, our innate connection to the natural world, and the mind-body-spirit connections we have to space and place are at the core of that process. Given that designers also give form to the nature and values of our time, which in turn forms the designer as well, should there not be more consciousness toward what and how we contribute to the nature and values of our time? Before setting out on paths well worn, what if we slowed down, and rethought new steps, a new path, and a new chart entirely.

Rethinking design, in the context of this exploration, does not mean applying same theories, approaches and methods to new problems, it means embracing entirely new paradigm shift that redefines approaches, theory and method.

One can find any number of articles on the web highlighting the ability of artificial intelligence's new role in creating design deliverables. As writer and UX designer, Miklos Philips explains in his article "The Present and Future of AI in Design" on toptal.com, that artificial intelligence can move "faster and more cheaply than humans due to artificial intelligence's increased speed and efficiency in processing massive amounts of data. A designer can then cherry-pick and approve adjustments based on that data. The most effective designs to test can be created expediently, and multiple prototype versions can be A/B tested with users," Philip writes. What will designers do? According to Philips, "Designers will bring the necessary empathetic context for innovation, which is how a business will succeed with AI."¹¹

Human empathy is now being categorized as a variable in the ontology of data programming as if it was an inert ingredient. (Don't forget to add your quarter cup of empathy to this design so we can get send it out.)



As we enter the age of augmented reality and artificial intelligence, designers' most profound contribution must be more than just following a construct of previously curated, data-mined paths dictated by what machines can do first, then relegating humans to fill in gaps afterwards just to give us something to do. Will augmented and artificial intelligence play a significant role in the varied and broadening discipline of graphic design? Yes, of course.

It already is. There is something about the way this path is unfolding that feels problematic, and just not very human-centered, or even holistic-centered, or in keeping with intuition and instincts that happen in the process of design by going through the process. Reason and cognition and logic are important. Magic can never be squeezed out of art, and it can never be squeezed out of design.

Humans have the capacity to see animal shapes in the clouds for no discernible reason. We have the ability to hear language in birdsong. We have the ability to feel unseen energy in a room by the hairs standing up behind on the back of our necks. We connect with probabilities and possibilities. We can instinctively sense the acausal, unexplainable, synchronistic randomness of the universe.

The enchantment of the natural world is a human realm. It has more purpose than to produce more mechanical or technical innovation, make things cheaper and faster, or provide a cup of empathy to design solution already created by artificial intelligence. The instincts of archaic man are still in us.

We access them through relationship to our own space and place. It is a nebulous mix of experiential, spiritual, physiological, psychological and metaphysical, but also very real. It is reality in the way only humans sensations and sense provide for us. A sense of place is the landscape where all of these concepts revolve around each other. A place where who we are reunites with where we are.



Current Conditions

In my quest for a better understanding of my own place, I slowed down and took a closer look. I shared some of what I observed in the previous pages. Needless to say, I saw things I didn't want to see. I also realized what I observed is not isolated to just my place. Practically every way of living in the world today, whether in a small town or metropolis, is affected by the modern conveniences and technological advancements that we are fortunate enough to benefit from in the Western modern world. Digital media, artificial intelligence and augmented reality are becoming so ubiquitous and entrenched in our ways of being that many people now rely on it as part of daily life and basic needs, thus humans are becoming less and less autonomous and self-reliant. The industrial and digital revolutions have afforded a quality of life with many 'solutions'. Yet, there are some glitches to the solutions. One of these is our disconnection with the natural world as it is pushed farther to the outskirts of our daily lives.

The natural environment is only one system that is part of a larger system. A system that includes humans, culture, and nature. It is our interactions, the way we make a living, the way we live lives, and ways of just being and interacting with the physical environment of our own places. When we assess current conditions and glitches in the solutions, we need to look at not only the ones that affect us, of which there are many, but also the ones that affect the other parts of the system, because those are the ones that end up affecting us too.

Architect Christopher Alexander refers to unwanted counter effects of a solution to a problem as a 'misfit' in his book *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*.¹ In other words, a solution with too many misfits creates other problems, so the solution doesn't fit all that well. Doctors have a similar mantra in their Hippocratic oath which dictates 'first do no harm.' The digital age has brought about rapid socio-cultural and socio-political transitions that have come with their own set of misfits. With increased globalization comes community breakdown and cultural homogenization. With advanced manufacturing comes environmental destruction. Entire job sectors once done by the human hand (and brain) are being eliminated by robotics and artificial intelligence. Visual cultures are becoming homogenized, and disappearing altogether at an accelerated rate. Entire ways of being are becoming fundamentally altered in this time of profound social, cultural and ecological transition. There is one misfit that is at the core of it all but that doesn't get as much attention in and of itself. It is the destruction of humans' bond with place.

It allows a shift in actions, behaviors, values and perceptions from one of membership in a community to membership in a global village at the expense of connection and



participation in the system of one's own place, one's own culture, environment, and cultural place-making. It is a construct of transactionalism vs. relationships and reciprocity. The current conditions we've created for our modern life have brought many solutions, but they have also brought some pretty big and wicked systematic misfits.

This is not an argument to abandon all modernity in society. We simply must adapt to eliminate the misfits. We can seek out adaptation through engaging on an ontological course correction that actually draws upon humans' powerful unconscious connection to the laws of the natural world, and our instinctual human bond to place. We can combine that with the cognition, reasoning and knowledge of our modern brains, and use methods of graphic exploration and communication to manifest those connections into new ways of thinking and engaging with design in relation to place, thereby embracing the power of our unconsciousness instinct within us and our consciousness as modern humans.

If we think of globalization and industrialization as being on one end of the pendulum, and the instinctual bond between humans, culture and nature on the other side, we could use a framework built of elements and principles for how people bond with place as a catalyst for rethinking approaches to graphic design theory, research, pedagogy, and applied solutions. We don't have to abandon one end of the pendulum in order to embrace the other. There can be balance.

However, we are autonomous living beings. This is first and foremost. We have needs that machines don't have. Humans have the ability to connect with what is instinctual in themselves and still participate in the best parts of a globalized, industrialized, digital technology world. We can influence our own ways of living and being so that they reflect wholeness—a more holistic triadic relationship of humans, culture, nature. With these contemplations in mind there are three approaches to this framework for examining identity, place, and design.

Method

Exploring Identity: Autoethnography, Phenomenology, Archetypes

Exploring one's sense of place substantively couldn't happen without also engaging in some ontological introspection into one's own identity and sense of self. Autoethnographic research is the method that provides for that engagement. The entire research process behind this book as an autoethnographic endeavor. The resulting outcome of this book comes from delving into personal story through autoethnographic visual research. Storytelling is integral to part of being human, and to the human connection to place. As Von Petzinger explains, the expression of personal stories means engaging with "syntactic language, which means that rather than just dealing with individual words or ideas, you have a framework in place that allows words to be strung



together into longer sequences.”² Stories require different kinds of words like nouns, verbs, and adjectives. No other species can communicate with that level of linguistic complexity. Stories go hand-in-hand with communicating one's experience with a place.

Ethnographic storytelling, especially graphic, has been around hundreds of thousands of years, through imagery, mark-making, symbols, and oral or written narrative, sharing stories reinforces sense of place, place-making, and human-place connection. Petzinger and her fellow colleagues believe 100,000-120,000 years ago our human ancestors in Africa had the capability of syntactic language. They believe this because of the existence of the complex system of their geometric symbols. There is a vocabulary and language in the stories told by those signs, symbols, illustrations, and marks.

When we navigate for better understanding of sense of place, we are also navigating for better understanding for sense of self as well. Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological examination of poetic imagery in *Poetics of Space*³ expanded my view of autoethnographic research method. The autoethnographic research, the predominate methods used, is evident in the phenomenological use of imagery, visuals, and signs representing exploration into my own conscious and unconscious connection between myself and my place. Carl Jung believed that signs and symbols were essential to the manifestation of the unconscious's universal concepts:—archetypes.

Jung explains in his book *Man and His Symbols*, 'archetype' is the name given to what Sigmund Freud cynically and judgmentally referred to 'archaic remnants' of the human collective unconscious.⁴ Freud's approach is that if humans beings are consciously responsible for them in some way, and the remnants are negative 'junk' yet to be unloaded. Jung believed that these manifestations were mental forms whose presence cannot be explained by anything in the individual's own life necessarily, but that have origin in 'aboriginal, innate,' and inherited collective human mind still connected with the imprints of human history within it. Jung stated that they were "A biological, prehistoric, and unconscious development of the mind in archaic man, whose psyche was still close to that of an animal." Jung is careful to point out that invoking the idea of archetypes, does not mean he is not referring to a specific aesthetic or representation, but to a motif. This is not to be confused with superstition, It is an instinctive trend within the human collective unconscious just "as marked as the impulse of birds to build nests, or ants to build colonies."⁵

Jung focused his research on dreams as the primary way of manifesting archetypes. But he also believed a person could engage with archetypes in self-discovery and transformation through direct observation, focused attention, interaction with surroundings, and through making art and symbols. He even created his own mandalas, and differentiated symbols between self, nature and culture. He focused strongly on symbols of the self: circles, numbers, the human figure, human body parts, and gemstones. Jung focused especially on where sense of self crossed into nature: animals, flowers,



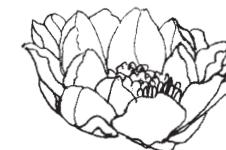


trees, and water. He saw that our psychic need to connect with nature was evident in our subconscious and unconscious manifestation. He also was around long enough to watch human beings' consciousness fracture away from it. "As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional "unconscious identity" with natural phenomena." ⁶

The graphic language of symbolic imagery, symbols, signs, marks and archetypal figures provide a psychic connotation and connection to the universe as a whole. Jung's psychology of the self explains that symbolic communication is realized in the physical world as our interpretations and reflections of self-identity. When we engage in symbolic communication we are engaging with the concept of wholeness and a reunion with our own unconscious self, and it becomes realized by connecting with the visuality and materiality in nature and objects of place. Culminating in a reunion of human and nature. Mind and soul. Body and mind. Conscious and unconscious. Nature and man. Culture and nature. Spirit and instinct. Jung wrote about what he called 'healing the split' between the conscious and unconscious. He urges humans to call on their instincts of archaic man and the unconscious mind for understanding and the finding of answers to address the current conditions of our world that our conscious minds have created for us. As Jung asserts "our conscious mind seems unable to do anything useful in this respect." ⁷

The unconscious mind also has an innate ability to manifest the graphic language of archetypal images and symbols during times of great need and crisis through either dreams or while interacting with the world. This is something that has come up in my thought process while working on this book while COVID-19 has now become part of our human experience. Jung further developed his ideas about manifesting archetypes with his theory on non-causal occurrences or signs, what he coined as synchronicity, which requires the psyche to be open to symbolic imagery and objects, and what they might have to say to us or teach us. I shared my own experience with this in describing the beginning stages of this quest and how signs and synchronicity seemed to be involved in some way. ⁸

As Maggie Macnab shares in her book *Decoding Design*, "integrating the personal unconscious into the broader collective unconscious in symbolic form creates a bridge of commonality." ⁹ Her book explores a visual research method of archetypal motifs, signs, graphic marks, symbols, and the symbolic meanings behind universal shapes and numerical principles. I share Macnab's interest in design's connection to symbolism and humans' unconscious connection with nature. Her work in this book and her other book, *Design by Nature*, have been instrumental in my research. Macnab points out the energy that can be harnesses by joining the two. "It is important for designers to reconnect with the wellspring of symbolism, visual communication that taps the dynamic energy of the collective psyche," writes Macnab. ¹⁰





Approaches

Ontological Design: *Design As Reflection of Who We Are*

With a method of autoethnographic method established, this exploration continues with the use of three approaches: ontological, phenomenological, and semiotic.

Ontology is a branch of philosophy going back to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The precursor to *Metaphysics*, called *Categories*, introduces the idea of systems, characterizations and categorizations of beings. Aristotle's *Physics* which also he put out prior to *Metaphysics* outlines the matter and physical existence of beings, and then *Metaphysics* serves as the self-referential study of the *nature* of beings. The word metaphysics derives from the Greek *meta ta physika* (after or behind or among the things of nature.) Much later, philosophers coined it with the Latin *ontologia* meaning 'science of being.' It is also called the science and study of the *essence of things*. Ontology is concerned with the nature of existence in terms of the how and why of being. It is concerned with attributes, processes, their qualities, and how things relate to one another.¹¹ Webster's Dictionary defines it as "(1a) a science or study of being; specifically, a branch of metaphysics relating to the nature and relations of being; (1b) a particular system according to which problems of the nature of being are investigated; first philosophy. (2) A theory concerning the kinds of entities and specifically the kinds of abstract entities that are to be admitted to a language system."¹²

Aristotle called his writing in *Metaphysics* the 'first philosophy.' Not because he worked on it first before his book on physics, in fact he believed a student should understand physics before metaphysics, but because it is the stuff of our being that is transcendent over everything else. As the Stanford's Encyclopedia of Philosophy explains, "The principles studied by 'first philosophy' may seem very general and abstract, but they are, according to Aristotle, better known in themselves, (as opposed to known to us), however remote they may seem from the world of ordinary experience. Still, since they are to be studied only by one who has already studied nature (which is the subject matter of the *Physics*), they are quite appropriately described as coming after *Physics*."¹³

Among other philosophies, this exploration draws from the science and philosophy of Aristotle's physics and metaphysics including ontology as an approach for rethinking design through the lens of sense of place. Essentially looking for the essence of sense of place—the nature of its being. This exploration uses this principle of metaphysics as an approach to turn the investigation onto design itself also, to understand the nature of design's nature of being as well. We are looking at design ontologically, but also thinking about design as an ontological discipline, as something that is deeply involved with our own ways of our own nature of being.

Spearheaded by the Arts Council of New Orleans, five large-scale murals were unveiled in Downtown New Orleans in June 2019. These works are the result of a competition from local and international artists. They are an encouraging sign to see as a counter pushing against the homogenization of visuality and culture. This particular mural isn't one of the original five, but it looks close to the same style, and it is just a few blocks from my house. It is on the side of the Bayou Road Community Center where people can sit outside in the common area and enjoy it. <https://www.neworleans.com/blog/post/public-art-in-new-orleans/>

In a bit of metaphysical irony over the last few decades, is the word ‘ontology’ has been appropriated by web developers, computer systems designers, and artificial intelligence engineers as a noun to describe “representational standard conceptual vocabularies in which to exchange data among systems.” Artificial intelligence pioneer Tom Gruber defines it from a computer science field perspective as “computer and information science, ontology is a technical term denoting an artifact that is designed for a purpose, which is to enable the modeling of knowledge about some domain, real or imagined.”¹⁴

As far back as the 1980’s, the artificial intelligence community came to use the term ontology to refer to both a theory of a modeled world and a component of knowledge systems. Some researchers, drawing inspiration from philosophical ontologies, viewed computational ontology as a kind of applied philosophy. It may seem odd for the computer science field to appropriate a philosophy that is all about such deep, existential questions such as: What is the nature of being? What is a being’s purpose? What is the nature and purpose of a being’s existence?

However, reading some of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, and especially *Categories*, one can understand the connection of how computer scientists and artificial intelligence engineers think and organize their thoughts and ideas in a similar way to Aristotle—in systems, language, categorization, relationships and classification.

Ontological studies and thinking do have to do with what kinds of entities or things exist within certain specifications, categories or ‘defined universe.’ Sometimes that universe is a human body, or a place, or the actual universe, or a computer program that dictates the actions and behaviors of artificial intelligence. An ontology may take a variety of forms, but necessarily it will include a vocabulary of terms, and some specification of their meaning, similar to a taxonomy. I would just point out that metaphysical and ontological explorations are more than just what can be solved by organizing lines of code and dictating “if this, then that” statements.

According to *Stanford’s Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Aristotle describes his ‘first philosophy’ (what we now call ontology) as “a science that studies things that are eternal, not subject to change, and independent of matter”. Such a science, Aristotle writes, is actually a theology, the “first” and “highest science.” This points to the way that Greek philosophers thought and contemplated theology, as something that has relationship to science and nature. Other concepts of Aristotle’s theory—reality, perception, essence, abstract, accidents (which really mean secondary or unintended attributes), and the concept of universal connection—are also explored as part of this exploration.¹⁵

Looking at design ontologically has begun to make forays into the modern discourse. In his book *Designs for the Pluriverse*, anthropology professor and author Arturo Escobar argues the urgent need for cultural and anthropological approaches to design, including the need for design to be recognized as inherently ontological.¹⁶



Escobar examines the work of several pioneers in this genre including a precedent-setting, groundbreaking book *Understanding Computers and Cognition* by Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores¹⁷ Themes of their research and the book include understanding language, communication, patterns, and systems. What is notable about it is that it is a book about computers that is also a book about physics, humans, and philosophy.

The book takes a deep and critical look at computer systems in context of our human lives, including what it means to be a machine and what it means to be human. Winograd and Flores discuss how better appreciating these differences and making the most of their differences is crucial to designing meaningful solutions, tools and systems. Their writing is full of prophetic insights from a time when computers was a tool barely used by the average individual in the course of living out one’s daily life as it is today. Winograd and Flores even discuss artificial intelligence.¹⁸

“All new technologies develop within the backdrop of a tacit understanding of human nature and human work. The use of technology in turn leads to fundamental changes in what we do, and ultimately in what it is to be human. We encounter the deep questions of design when we recognize that in designing tools we are designing ways of being.”¹⁹

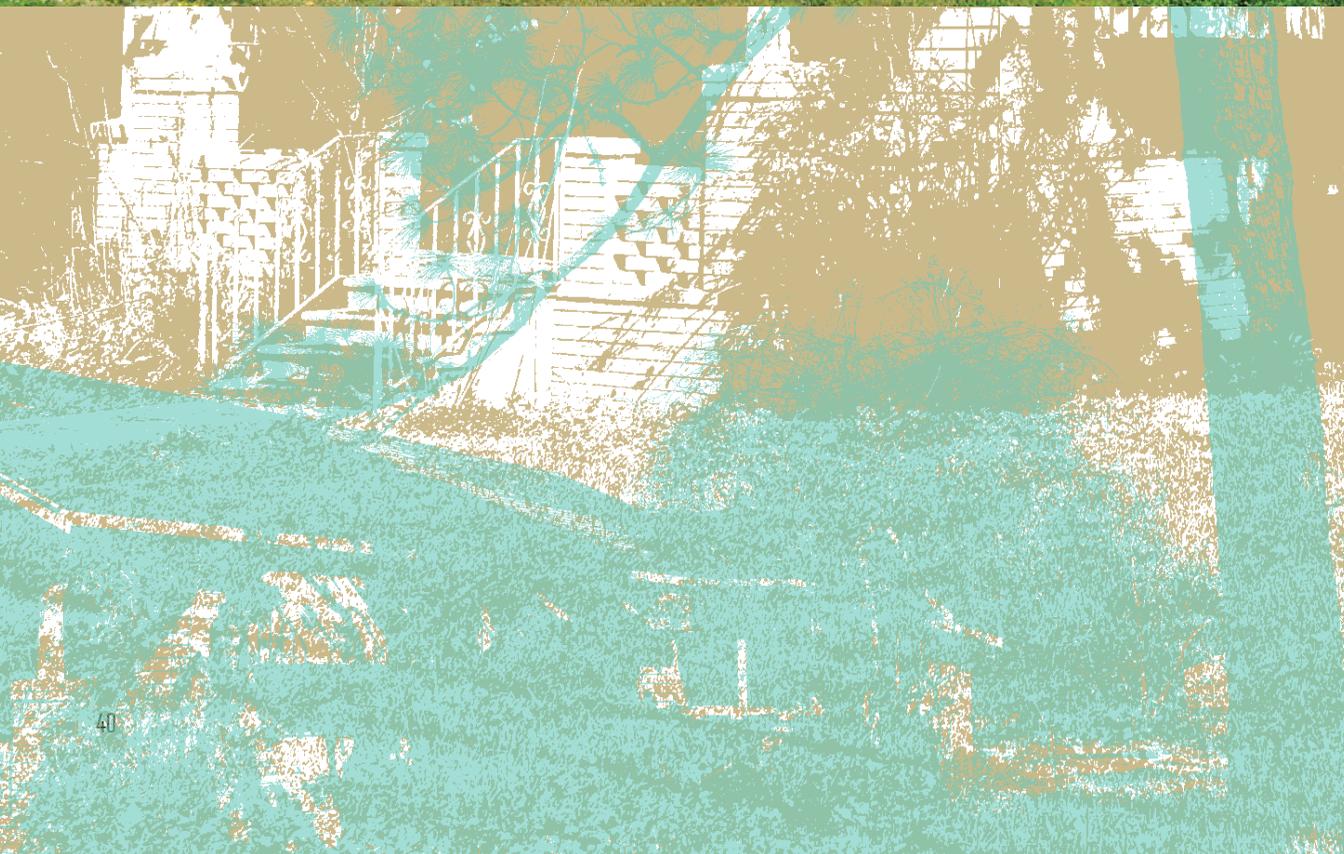
Just like tools or object design, graphic design is equally and maybe even more fundamentally ontological. We create ontologies. With the advent of personal digital devices infiltrating human existence and the explosion of consumer culture in the last few decades, graphic design’s ontological influence has grown deeper and more vast by the ‘revolution of sorts in communication, information and interaction.’²⁰

As designers, the visuality and experiences we create contribute to individual and collective perceptions. We create visual and experiential manifestations of how we understand ourselves and the world around us.

As Winograd and Flores propose: “We are engaging in a philosophical discourse about the self—about what we can do and what can be. Tools are fundamental to action, and through our actions we generate the world. The transformation we are concerned with is not a technical one, but a continuing evolution of how we understand our surroundings and ourselves—of how we continue becoming the beings we are.”²¹

In the 21st century, graphic design permeates the zeitgeist of our age. Design dictates tools, objects and systems are created with an influence greater than ever before in human history. Because of this, design also creates actions, beliefs and values. By thread of connection then, design imprints on the stories of who we are, shapes history and our surroundings, and influences our ways of being in ways that contribute to what it is to be human. In this way, design is very much an ontological reflection of who we are.





Phenomenology of Place: *Place As Reflection of Who We Are*

Ontology and phenomenology go hand in hand. Like ontology, there are many iterations to the definition of phenomenology. According to *Stanford University's Philosophy Department Encyclopedia*, “phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions.”²²

Johns Hopkins Guide for Literary Theory and Criticism describes phenomenology as “a philosophy of experience. For phenomenology the ultimate source of all meaning and value is the lived experience of human beings. All philosophical systems, scientific theories, or aesthetic judgments have the status of abstractions from the ebb and flow of the lived world.”²³ The task of the philosopher, according to phenomenology, is to describe the structures of experience, in particular consciousness, the imagination, relations with other persons, and the situatedness of the human subject in society and history. Phenomenological theories of literature regard works of art as mediators between the consciousnesses of the author and the reader or as attempts to disclose aspects of the being of humans and their worlds.²⁴

Professor of architecture and author of *House as a Mirror of Self*, Clare Cooper Marcus explains that as humans our surroundings are reflections of ourselves. When we see ourselves reflected back by the mirror of what’s around us, we find deeper meaning and connection with what we put out into the world. “As we change and grow throughout our lives, our psychological development is punctuated not only by meaningful emotional relationships with people, but also by close affective ties with a number of significant physical environments.”²⁵ She includes ties to land and nature of a place, as well as personal relationships, as creating stronger attachment to place than the mere number of days spent in a particular dwelling, per se.

In this exploration to rethinking design through the lens of sense of place we are not place-making in the traditional sense. In a way, the phenomenological approach of place we seek is more about sense of place-making. The specific geographic location is important of course. Although we are navigating this geographic place through sensations, memory, history, experience, intuition, instincts, and the senses. In another way, we are exploring the phenomenology of visual, graphic and symbolic language, much in the way that The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard explored the phenomenology of literary poetic imagery in *Poetics of Space*.

Bachelard contemplates the connections between poetic imagery and phenomenology of our imagination by examining the ontology of most intimate of spaces and places: houses, drawers, wardrobes, attics, corners, seashells, and nests. To a bird, a nest is an

Home of my great grandparents Lovincy and Elvire Matherne in Bayou Blue, Louisiana.

important place. It is a home. To a mollusk, it is his shell. These spaces speak to us also in phenomenological language of the imagination. We can get a sense for those little places. We enter into this exploration with that phenomenology of place where graphic language, imagination and self-identity converge in our unconsciousness. As Bachelard explains, phenomenology's "repercussions invite us to give greater depth to our own existence. In the resonance we hear the poem, in the reverberations we speak it, it is our own. The reverberations bring about a change of being."²⁶

Much in the way Bachelard inquires about space, we seeking phenomenological 'reverberations' of place. Phenomenology of imagination influences our sense of place too. The symbolic communication of our place is influenced by themes of space/place, imagination/being, self/identity, object/material, texture, color, and other aspects. Bachelard's inquiry influences this thesis' critical and philosophical exploration, as well as the resulting design ecology framework, on three points of connection with regard to these themes. His exquisite examination, and philosophical prowess was a guidepost for the pathway of rethinking design phenomenologically.

Graphic communication uses elements and principles to create a visual language system that affects the human psyche beyond a reasoning we can fully logically explain. Pattern, movement, law of closure, and gestalt are all a part of nature and the universe and therefore we are inexplicably drawn to them by the dormant or not so dormant unconsciousness and the nature of our being (the ontology of ourselves). Symbolic language in particular speaks to that part of our imagination, and activates our psychological and psychic connections to the world beyond logic and outside our own physical being from a collective unconsciousness that we share with other human beings, other living beings, matter, and elements of the universe.

Secondly, Bachelard explores the realm of our instinctual and innate connection to the natural world, and how that relates to symbolic language—whether literary or visual. He combines theories of symbolic language and connection to nature in this one observation: "A nest, like any other image of rest and quiet, is immediately associated with the image of a simple house. A nest—is a precarious thing, and yet it sets us to daydream about security. Why does this obvious precariousness not arrest daydreams of this kind?

The answer to this paradox is simple; when we dream, we are phenomenological without realizing it. In a sort of naive way, we relive the instinct of the bird, taking please in accentuating the mimetic features of the green nest in green leaves...it is the atmosphere of happiness that always surrounds large trees...we place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world., we receive the beginning of confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence."²⁷

The third point of connection is his exploration of space and place and its phenomenological influence on self identity. "He values imagination because he recognizes that understanding without imagination is doctrine without growth. And without growth, what chance is there to engage the complexity that bounds us?"²⁸ Bachelard invites us to explore our own personal, phenomenological imagination and let it lead us where it will in becoming who we become. We believed in the power of phenomenology and imagination to "liquidate the past and invent confront what is new". They can reinvent, transcend and transform. He invites us "to consider the imagination as a major power of (our own) human nature."²⁹

Sense of Place Semiotics

The third approach to rethinking design is semiotic, specifically the semiotics of place and sense of place. Anthropologist Yi-Fu Taun writes in *Space and Place*, "place can be defined in a variety of ways...place is whatever stable object catches our attention... we may be deliberately searching for a landmark, or a feature on the horizon may be so prominent that it compels attention."³⁰ This provides deeper insight into how place is represented. What is it visually or materially that make us feel at home? What is that makes us we are in a place, and that place as meaning? Tuan goes on to explain that these are not the grand monuments or profound landmarks. "A single inanimate object, useless in itself, can be the focus of a world. In the same way, a spot under a tree, or along a river bank can become the most precious place."³¹

Taun evokes the poem *Anecdote of the Jar* by writer Wallace Stevens. In the poem, there is a hill in the wilderness. Stevens places a jar there. And suddenly, something happens to that space. "The wilderness rose up to it, and sprawled around it, no longer wild. The jar took dominion."³² Essentially, the landscape is transformed by this object and by man who put it there. This is a much debated poem in terms of what Stevens' may be trying to assert. One school of thought I happen with which I happen to agree, given Stevens proclivities for land and nature, is that the meaning is about man's conquest over nature. Placing of the jar on top of the hill means that the wilderness—the natural world—has to grow around the jar, and that, in the end, nature loses its wildness. What Taun surmises from this poem is interesting from a purely semiotic of place point of view. Tuan writes "the human being can command a world because he has feelings and intentions. The art object may seem to do so because its form...is symbolic of human feeling."³³

There are some crucial takeaways from this poem, and Tuan's assessment that relate to semiotic approach. Perceptions and senses are activated in relationship to physical surrounding space. Humans can command 'a world' because of our human intentions and feelings. An object's form can be symbolic of human feeling. One of the assertions of this thesis is that because of the truth in the last three statements, what we make and create in relation to our places is so important. Another assertion of this thesis is that there are symbolic meanings inherent to place that are not made by man, but that come from natural world. As Steven Skaggs explains in his book *FireSigns*, semiotics is the study of signs and signification. The origin of our propensity toward symbolic thinking and communication goes back to those Ice Age early humans. From the first time early humans etched those symbolic marks, they were engaging in semiotic communication. It is in our nature. It part of our emotional intelligence written into our DNA.

There is a power in the signification and meaning inside the semiotics of place that is foundational to the paradigm shift that the sense of place design ecology seeks to explore. Formally and contextually, the design ecology theory is not predicated on a





**The world cannot be
discovered by a journey
of miles, no matter how long,
but by a spiritual journey,
a journey of one inch,
very arduous, and humbling,
and joyful, by which we arrive
at the ground at our feet
and learn to be at home.**

— Wendell Berry

certain ideology. It doesn't seek to be modernism, post-modernism, deconstructionist post-structuralism. From a visual and symbolic approach, it seeks to reunite us with the power and meaning at core of our human connection to place, which inherently is tied to semiotics—the study of sign and signification.³⁴

To understand their powerful meaning, the pathways Carl Jung provides where sense of self, identity, nature and symbols meet, which includes his work on archetypes that I touched on earlier. The main divisions of the self he established are consciousness and unconsciousness, which then branch out into persona, ego, anime/animus, shadow and the self. Collective unconsciousness involves humanity's universal and archetypal shared histories, memories and experiences—including the remnants discussed earlier.

This exploration draws from that individual and collective unconsciousness with a semiotic approach with regard to identity (sense of self) and place (surroundings, culture, nature). My own sense of place has strong roots in the semiotics of my place. The visual, graphic, symbolic language of my places have shaped my own place identity and perceptions, but at the same time lured by siren the symbolic communication of other places, not just my own. I am what Wendell Berry would call a 'placed person', but I also have a strong case of wanderlust. Lippard describes her own fascination for places as her 'locus of desire' in her book *Lure of the Local*.³⁵

There are several places with particular meaning for me, but the two with the most meaning are Louisiana and Nebraska. I was born in New Orleans, but many of my most vivid and influencing childhood memories come from time spent in little towns a bit south and west from New Orleans in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. My ancestors came to this part of the world 300 years ago. My ancestors on that side of my family, my mother's side, came to Nebraska in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, some of them by way of actual covered wagons. We moved from New Orleans to Omaha when I was 12. From that moment, Nebraska became my place as well, part of my identity. From the year we moved until my mid 20s, I split time between the two places. I spent school years in Omaha (really cold) and summers in Louisiana (really hot), enjoying the extreme weather each place had to offer. I moved back to New Orleans permanently in my late 20s. When you grow up in two places, especially if you are one of those people tuned into places, you learn from an early age what place meaning and attachment is all about.

A strong connection to land and physical surroundings has been instilled in me by family from both sides, half Cajun French and half pioneer. Nebraska is as much a part of me as Louisiana, however, the focus of this book is on the latter. Although, because so much of my upbringing from the time I was 12 was spent in Nebraska, it is impossible to extract that influence from my identity. That place too is a part of my identity, which makes this exploration into my place identity even more layered and complex.

Sociologists and cultural anthropologists have established that our values, behaviors, perceptions are influenced by surroundings, and by semiotic meanings of our



surroundings. Semiotics of place is the crossroads where identity, culture, heritage, history, time, experience, aesthetics and language all merge and intersect. There is a vast range of context to how place semiotics is defined and discussed. This investigation is not exploring signs and their signification within the utilitarian functioning of our society, like a stop sign or a fire truck siren. The semiotic exploration we embark upon delves into ways of seeing and experiencing the more symbolic signs of place and sense of place. It seeks to literally seek a way of seeing a place from a semiotic approach and perspective.

John Berger asserted in his book *Ways of Seeing*, "It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we may explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it." He goes on to explain, "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. Although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing."³⁶ He is defining a reciprocal relationship. In the case of rethinking the way we see the visuality of place in relation to place meaning and identity, this creates a sense of place semiotics. The semiotics of sense of place include the visual, but also the aural, experiential, biological, physiological, and material. It includes the smells, sounds, bio-physical reactions to the elements of place—culminating into a semiotic, sensory shaping of identity through life experience bound to that place and that place uniquely.

Consider the image of the home on a previous page. It belonged to my great grandparents Lovincy Matherne and Elvire Arceneaux Matherne. My great aunt Ruth took care of them both in this home for decades until they died, and then continued to live there nearly until she died last year. It is clearly an older home with a particular style of exterior. It is a home where family gathered. It is surrounded by acres of flat land that the family farmed going back generations. I watched chickens peck around, and chicken eggs warm under a heat lamp inside a smelly chicken house in the back.

I listened transfixed as the adults spoke French in the living room parlor. It sounded musical to me. The pungent smell of coffee with chicory from an old-fashion percolator wafted in the air from the kitchen mixing with their voices. When we were young, my cousin and I coined the phrase 'Bayou Blue windows' to describe the distinct large metal awnings attached to each window of nearly every house. Every house on Bayou Blue Road had them, as opposed to the newer homes in Houma or New Orleans. The awning and the house are a symbol, a way of seeing place.

As Skaggs explains (invoking the Charles Peircean theory on symbols), what I've created in my mind are semiotic moments with my great grandparents house and the awning. They have become visents (signs) The referent (what the awning stands for) is the memories and the people. The interpretant (Skaggs defines as "effect a sign/symbol has on the receiver; an understanding.") is relates to my sense of place—having to do with heritage, family, belonging, things I learned as a child, particular physical surroundings that made an impact on me, and other effects from those memories that have imprinted



on my place meaning and identity. Semiotic communication depends upon a way of seeing place.³⁷ I can't expect everyone who indulges me in my little semiotic moment with awnings, coffee, chickens, and my great grandparents' home to have the same interpretant or the specific characteristics, physicality of these signs related to moments there. Can I reasonably expect that in terms of symbolic relations within this contextual moment that another person understands the meaning of what I am generally conveying? What if you see this house and it brings up horrible memories for you? These are the complexities and powers of symbolism and semiotics. The interpretant relies on the receiver. Whatever assertion or effect is part of the communication process. There is dialogue. It is hoped that there are cultural acceptances that come into play. A house generally has some agreed upon connotations. As Skaggs points out, 'our negotiations with the world and with each other in ferreting out what we agree upon about the world are always, to some degree, tentative. One of the tasks of semiotics is to highlight the relative tentativeness, to suggest a basis for greater or lesser confidence in acting on the tentative conclusions we draw, and to provide a way to dissect the process.'³⁸

In fact, the sign of a house/home is a well-established archetypal image and symbol of self, specifically the act of inhabiting—of refuge and shelter. It is an iconic, indexical, and symbolic sign, which is important to its significance to sense of place. The house is iconic to living in Bayou Blue. It is indexical in relation to referent to a place—southeast Louisiana. It is symbolic in its culturally agreed-upon connection to family, security, refuge, and shelter—psychologically and physically. It is symbolic to my own personal place identity. As Berger explains, "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things (we see) and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are."³⁹ Because of the phenomenon of semiotics of place or sense of place, what we see and how we bond with place through seeing has the power to shape who we are, but also how we perceive and value our own place and that is translated into our we value and perceive the larger world. Meaning and identity attach place through the language of the place's symbolic communication. Because the semiotic approach adopted for exploration and investigation so closely aligns with the phenomenological and ontological, they makes a formidable and powerful approach set for the sense of place design ecology.



Three Bird Nests

During the short span of a few weeks one summer during graduate school, I came across three bird nests three separate times. This was unusual in and of itself, but especially so because it happened at the same time I was helping my brother move across the country, from one home to a new home. The first two nests were empty and had fallen on the ground. The third was in the backyard of a lifelong friend whose home we had stopped at along the way during our cross country trip from Maine to Omaha. This third nest was inside a vine attached to a large lattice structure that was part of her patio, and there was a baby bird in it. I took notice of how the nest was built in a way that it was using the vine along with the lattice structure as support, and part of its own construction. I thought about the other two bird nests and how they had fallen out of their trees, not having the benefit of a lattice for better support.

Not only was there a certain synchronicity to this happening, just a few months later, I was introduced by an advisor to a piece of writing as part of my graduate studies which were also synchronistic, and have since become significant springboards of rethinking design, and pretty much everything else. *A City is Not a Tree*, by architect Christopher Alexander, discusses a model for thinking about systems and connections by using the study of how cities are laid out and organized.⁴⁰ He uses the structures of a tree and a semi-lattice to critically examine how cities are better structured as semi-lattices. This led me to read Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, which has also become a significant influence. Even later, I came across Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* by way of a suggestion from a friend who is a first-person oral history documentary filmmaker. As Bachelard eloquently writes, "when we examine a nest, we place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world, we receive a beginning of confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence. Would a bird build a nest if it did not have the instinct for confidence in the world?"⁴¹

Not only does Bachelard's phenomenological examination of nests speak to my own connection to them, but his investigation opened another philosophical way to rethink semiotics of place. Nests evoke home, space, place, belonging, and security. They can serve as an archetypal symbol of mother and inhabiting. Homes are lost. We leave the nest to start adult life. Sometimes people go back home. The bird is a powerful symbol — one of self transcendence, resilience, self-reliance, oneness, and human spirit. Three bird nests came my way. Two had fallen to the ground and were empty. Truthfully, these came my way during a particular stressful time. Then the third nest crossed my path and it was doing just fine. Maybe not only cities should look to that semi-lattice structure, but birds should look into it. For that matter, maybe I should too. Was that the message? There were actually a lot of curious messages coming to me from these nests. Jung describes this event as the moment when the "union of consciousness with the unconscious contents of the mind. Out of this union arises what resulting in a kind of transcendent function of the psyche, by which (humans) can achieve his highest goal: the full realization of the potential of his individual Self. This is why they are called symbols of transcendence, they represent man's striving to attain the goal. The bird is the most fitting symbol of transcendence, representing the peculiar nature of intuition working through 'a medium', that is, an individual who is capable of obtaining knowledge of distant events—or facts of which he consciously knows nothing about—by going into a trans-like state."⁴² I am not a 'medium', and I wasn't in a trance, but there was definitely something going on with these three nests.



"Whenever we enter the land, sooner or later we pick up the scent of our own histories."

— William Least Heat-Moon

The Sacred Bond Between Humans and Place

Kentucky-based writer Wendell Berry has a strong sense of place. It has instilled in him a deep sense of stewardship as well—an ethic that has been the muse of his writing and his way of life, and ways of being for the better part of his life. In 2018, he sat down for a rare interview with Allen White of the Tellus Institute. He talked about people, relationship with his place, and the general idea of human beings' role as stewards of natural environment. He points out what he believes is the key to addressing much of what has disconnected us from the nature of our places and from each other—a return to localism.

"My little neighborhood of Port Royal is dependent on the earth. The earth is dependent on the universe. But in a way, the planet—people love to talk about the planet—is somewhat theoretical. There are millions of places on this planet that I don't know at all. But I have to be ready, if my love and knowledge of this place has spoken to me, to receive people coming from those other places, and say, "Look, these little places need to become a common cause." That would lead to conversation, the kind of conversation that I long to see take place. It's imaginable insofar as we can develop the vocabulary, the way of talking, to convey our own particulars to other people." ¹

Berry's points are relevant to this examination of sense of place from a design thinking standpoint with some help from psychology and physics. Regarding scope, thinking from a holistic mindset and then acting on it is too broad. Humans, as matter, are greatest affected by something that they interact with more directly. We bond with specific local spaces and places, not the whole planet. So there are considerations of the physics principle of locality to consider. Second, Berry is talking human emotional bonding, place attachment and feeling of stewardship of an individual place. This too, as scholars have determined, happens on a local level through myriad ways including personal life experiences directly related to environment and place. Third, he allude to a personal value placed on the uniqueness of his place, the "particulars", but the need for a common cause to extrapolate that value to all 'the little places'.



As Berry argues, places should not be homogenized franchises of a centralized ideology or agenda. When this occurs, place attachment and meaning is diluted, which leads to lack of stewardship. Stewards have an 'elated, loving' interest for the care and use of land, and for living with the idea of 'economy' and 'carrying capacity' with what the natural environment can provide. Lastly, Berry makes the point that communication is not only a part of this problem—it is a necessary, vital component.

Berry is pointing out the need for honest, heartfelt conversation between people with place attachment and knowledge of a place—the stewards—and those that come from other places with have not developed place attachment, dependence, identity, nor sense of stewardship of a place.

Berry is contemplating, even challenging, what would the language of that conversation be? What is the vocabulary we can use? What subjects would the conversation be about? What Berry is expressing overall, and what he expresses in most of his writing, centers around something that has been written into our development as living beings through thousands of years—the sacred bond humans have with place. Modern scholars use terms such as place meaning, place attachment, place dependence, and place identity to describe this bond.

Most people instinctively have a sense of place, but it isn't usually at the forefront of our consciousness. We have an innate propensity to develop a connection to place, but for many people it lies deep within their unconsciousness.

In his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, geography professor Yi-Fu Tuan describes how early humans paused in 'place' because of biological needs. As a result, this created a construct for humans to associate 'felt value' for spaces, making them places. This led to the development of concepts such as permanence, memory, intimacy, senses, sensations and perceptions tied to specific space that were imprinted on the human brain as the human brain developed over millions of years. The concept of sense of place sounds complicated, but it really has a sublime systematic simplicity to it.²

Tuan defines sense of place simply as a setting where humans attribute meaning and attachment. There are many academic disciplines who use methods and approaches for defining sense of place according to their field of study. Sociologists, anthropologists, phenomenologists, environmental psychologists, geographers, and landscape architects have all formed their own similar but varying definitions.

However through my own research, I have found basic ingredients which remain constant: people (identity), culture (built environment, objects, materiality, societal assignment of meaning and value), and physical environment (nature). This is makes up the territory that this examination will seek to chart.³

Gerald L. Young, Ph.D., a Washington State University professor known for his work in human ecology has published numerous academic papers on sense of place and humans' relationship to place. His definition, which is posted on encyclopedias.com, and other

A social-ecological system (SES) is an integrated system of ecosystems and human societies with a reciprocal feedback and interdependence.

reference texts, defines sense of place as having three meanings. "First, sense of place is made from the particular characteristic of a place that makes it what it is. For example, though few people have visited Antarctica, most have some 'sense' of it.

They have a visual image in their mind's eye of what that continent is like. That image may be realistic, or unrealistic, or may be dramatically simplified, but it will usually be based on physical characteristics that the place actually does have."⁴

"The second meaning is the particular sense that individuals have of places they know by experience; we all have a sense of many places that we have visited, but a sense of the same place is experienced in many ways by many different people. Even after a visit to Antarctica, for example, people will return with a variety of different views, depending on their reasons for being there, on how long they stayed, and on how much they know about the place. An explorer will carry one view, a natural scientist studying how organisms adapt to extreme environments will bring back a quite different view, and a tourist yet another viewpoint."⁵

"For many, a third meaning is the only one of consequence: that one can gain a sense of place only from being or becoming deeply involved with a place and by coming to know that one place and its inhabitants intimately. This is the meaning implicit in the claim that modern Americans must regain a sense of place to counteract their mobility and alienation from environment."⁶

David Hummon, Ph.D., sociology professor at College of the Holy Cross (previously at Berkeley) writes and teaches on the subject of place. In his dissertation, *Community Attachment: Local Sentiment and Sense of Place*, he provides more details.

"By sense of place, I mean people's subjective perceptions of their environments and their more or less conscious feelings about those environments. Sense of place is inevitably dual in nature, involving both an interpretive perspective on the environment and an emotional reaction to the environment. Sense of place involves a personal orientation toward place, in which one's understanding of place and one's feelings about place become fused in the context of environmental meaning."⁷

In 2017, Ecology and Society shared an article on their website published by The Resilience Alliance, "The contribution of sense of place to social-ecological systems research: a review and research agenda." The researchers use sense of place theory as a basis for a compelling set of definitions for sense of place and suggestions on sense of place is an effective approach for further (SES) research and studies. The researchers' emphasize a 'humans-in-nature' (or human-centered) perspective.⁸

Their descriptions include inline citations to their research as well as that of others. This provides working definitions from which to base this thesis' examination of humans, culture, and nature as parts of sense of place. "**Place attachment** is an emotional bond, usually positive, between individuals or groups and their environment (*Altman and Low 1992*). As such, it is fundamentally evaluative (i.e., good vs. bad, important vs. unimportant).



Place attachment is sometimes conceived as having two subdomains: dependence and identity. **Place dependence** (Stokols and Shumaker 1981) conveys an instrumental connection between people and place, conceived and measured as the ability of a setting to facilitate goal achievement and to satisfy important needs (see also Tidball and Stedman 2013 for reflections on the positive nature of dependence). It has been measured through survey items such as, ‘This is the best place to do the things I enjoy’ (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001).

In comparison, **place identity** is defined by (Harold) Proshansky (1978:155) as those dimensions of self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment. Place elements thus become partial answers to the symbolic question of ‘Who am I?’ which plays a part in the formation of the self (Sack 1997). Place identity is an evaluative concept and should not be confused with the structures and functions that characterize a particular setting (what resilience literature refers to as system identity; Folke et al. 2010) or with what is sometimes called *place character* (e.g., Lyon 2014). A person’s place identity has been measured through survey items such as, ‘This place really reflects the kind of person I am.’ (e.g., Jorgensen and Stedman 2001). Although dependence and identity can be articulated as distinct conceptual domains, research results are mixed: some scholars (Moore and Graefe 1994) find these to be distinct components of attachment, whereas others (e.g., Stedman 2002) find that they conjoin into a common domain.

Place meaning stands in contrast to attachment in that they are descriptive statements (cognitions, in social psychology terms) about what a place is, what it is like, and the kinds of images it conveys (Manzo 2005, Brehm et al. 2013, Jacquet and Stedman 2013). We can think of them simply as a series of adjectives, i.e., answers to what kind of place a setting is: polluted, lonely, warm. A second type of meaning is a little less descriptive and a little more symbolic or interpretive, i.e., what, symbolically, does a place mean? Home? Escape? Third, place meanings can be considered as **place character** (Lyon 2014): a given setting such as a farmscape, tourist place, or wilderness, for example. Sense of place emerges from human interactions with the biophysical environment.

(Lewicka (2011:213) notes, ‘For many years, interest in social dimensions of place attachment has been stronger than interest in its physical dimensions.’ Sense of place has been viewed mostly as a social construction—a product of shared behavioral and cultural processes, rather than the result of perceptual and cognitive processes rooted in physical characteristics of settings (e.g., Greider and Garkovich 1994). However, some authors suggest that we can think of the material environment as contributing to sense of place through direct and indirect causal mechanisms:

(1) directly, as the raw material for meanings inferred directly from the landscape. It is easier, for example, to distill wilderness meanings from a landscape with old-growth trees and clean water than from a landscape polluted by human use;

(2) indirectly, by enabling or constraining experiences that contribute to meanings. One cannot catch fish, and create meanings such as good fishing places, where no fish exist,



e.g., if the water has become polluted or too warm. For an example, see Stedman (2003a) and Stedman and Hammer (2006), who quantitatively assessed the relationship between the number of houses on the shoreline of lakes to meanings, attachment, and concern about water quality.

Therefore, we view sense of place as an emergent property of a social-biophysical interaction, although so far, sense of place research has had a limited appreciation of the role of nature and ecology in forming place (but see, e.g., Stedman and Ingalls (2014), who engage the intersection of topophilia and biophilia as mutually constitutive). ”⁹

As the Resilience Alliance paper reveals, assessing place identity, dependence, meaning, character and attachment relies heavily on empirical, qualitative research and evidence. However, the experiences, feelings and emotions are tied to bio-physical, quantifiable characteristics. For instance, qualities of a certain landscape, like cold weather or specific aspects of flora/fauna in the terrain, have the ability to evoke physiological reactions that become imprinted in configuration with the other elements relating to sense of place, such as experience, visibility or materiality.

To summarize, place dependence is defined as relating to goal achievement and satisfying important needs. Place identity involves a perception of self-reflection in a place. Place meaning can be represented through its characteristics and the symbolic representations of place. A sense of place is largely experiential, involving behavioral and cultural processes, but it also involves social-biophysical interactions.

By drawing from this definitions as well as the general understanding of sense of place theory, this exploration can dig deeper into the patterns of relationships and interconnected influences to these component areas of sense of place have as seen through the three areas in which I've divided sense of place: humans, culture, and nature. From there, characteristics and components can be determined.

Some of these are more concrete, like the physical characteristics of a place which is reflected in its materiality, objects and physical natural surroundings. Some are more conceptual and abstract, such as the symbolic ways identity is represented by the symbolic communication of place and the memories and experiences that happened in a place. In terms of rethinking design, this process begins to build a vocabulary with which to develop a language, then a framework, and then the patterns of interactions and relationships needed to have communications and conversations about sense of place through design.





Humans

Elements and influences relating to identity and sense of self

Gradients of Intimacy

Steven Feld and Keith Basso, editors of *Senses of Place* describe their book's collection of ethnographic sense of place essays as personal explorations into "the relation of the sensations to emplacement; the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, struggled over; and multiple ways places are metonymically and metaphorically are tied to identities."¹

Interactions between a person and a place can be a very intimate experience. I borrow *gradients of intimacy* from Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, in which his intimacy gradient pattern refers to characterizing the gradient level of intimacy of a building spaces. For example, a person's bedroom is a more intimate space than a dining room.² Examining and determining a language for sense of place has the same pattern. There are different gradients of intimacy in the way humans interact with places. There are varying gradients of intimacy in the way humans to other humans in places.

Renowned environmental psychologist Harold M. Proshansky, an early researcher on sense of place published several research articles and books on the subject including a paper called *The City and Self-Identity* published in 1978, where Proshansky alludes to the varying levels of intimacy to place identity. "Place-identity is defined as those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills, and behavioral tendencies relevant to a specific environment."³

Proshansky points out that every human being is influenced in some way by their physical surroundings, and by the process of experiencing space and place through their own body and mind. No two people experience things the exact same way. While there is also the existence of the collective unconscious, and then cultural agreement of symbolism that influence sense of place, gradients of intimacy deals with the individual conscious or unconscious interactions and experiences through which meaning and attachment are interpreted and then folded into personal place identity and sense of self. One of the most intimate reflections on how place affects identity I've come across is by author Bell Hooks. In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, Hooks shares deeply-held personal reflections of growing up as a black girl in rural Kentucky and how that shaped her identity. This provides a platform for her to personally and intimately connect with societal collective issues such as local and global environmentalism, racial injustice,

and inequality. Hooks writes: “Making the connection between geographical location and psychological states of being was useful for me. It empowered me to recognize the serious dysfunctional aspect of the southern world I was raised in, the ways internalized racism affected our emotional intelligence, our emotional life, and yet it also revealed the positive aspects of my upbringing, the strategies of resistance that were life enhancing.”⁴ Her account of growing up black in rural Kentucky, having to combat both the subtly insidious and overtly oppressive ways that racism existed in her place, and how combating that over generations empowered what she describes as causing ‘black folks to create a sub-culture based on determination and survivalist mentality’ is precisely an example of the power of an intimate relationship with place has on identity.

“Those oppositional values imprinted on my psyche early in childhood enabled me to develop a survivalist will to resist that stood me in good stead both during the times I returned home and in the wilderness of spirit I dwelled in away from home. Oppositional habits of being I had learned during my childhood forged a tie to my native place that could not be severed.”⁵

Hooks’ reflection on place also includes her deep attachment for the environment of her place, the terrain and environment which is indelibly tied to her personal experiences. As she poetically describes how important Kentucky is to her identity, Hooks shares details of how the materiality and experiences from childhood all the way through adulthood melded together visually in her mind, shaping who she is. She recalls imagery such as porches, bluegrass under her feet, and quilt-making with her grandmother. Her bond is represented in visual imagery, objects attach into ways of being creating a kind of personal semiotics representing her own place identity and sense of self. Hooks reveals several gradients of intimacy with place—as an individual, involving family heritage, history, culture, and with the natural environment.

As cultural anthropologist Yi-Fu Taun explains, the first intimate contact we have with the world sets up our lifelong relationship with the spatial aspect of place. We are born. We learn about space through understanding our own bodies in space.⁶ Anyone who has witnessed the profound moment a child takes their first steps, balancing their body, figuring out where their feet meet the ground, is witnessing the intimate realization of one’s own body in space. As we develop, we begin to realize our own consciousness in relation to space and place. The mind-body relationship with space and place grows and expands, and we begin to form a sense of self related to place.

In psychologist Harold Proshanky’s paper, “Place-Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self”, published in the book *Readings in Environmental Psychology* edited by Linda Groat, he provides an additional, detailed definition for place identity, its critical function, and theoretical implications when it comes to being influenced from a larger geographical and physical surrounding level. “Through personal attachment to geographically locatable places, a person acquires a sense of belonging and purpose which give meaning

to his or her life.” Individuals undoubtedly “define who and what they are in terms of such strong affective ties to house and home and/or neighborhood and community.” Proshanky establishes that physical setting and personal development of place identity are ‘inextricably tied to the social and culture existence of a group.’⁷ This extends out to larger geographic locations. “Interwoven into these clusters are the social definitions of these settings which consist of norms, behaviors, rules and regulations that are inherent in the use of these places and spaces. They are tied to social and cultural existence of a group, as expressed by its valued activities, interpersonal relationships, and individual and group role functions.”⁸ Proshanky points out the study of how physical settings impact place identity is not studied enough. “Rarely has the impact of neighborhood deterioration, geographic mobility, and technological reconstruction of the landscape been evaluated in terms of their impact on self-identity.”⁹

Gradients of intimacy also interact with place on levels of how place is visually and symbolically represented, and how that is phenomenologically perceived by the individual. For example, one of the most widely accepted symbolic signs of place when it comes to place identity is the home. As Tuan explains, “Hearth, shelter, home or home base are intimate places to human beings to humans everywhere.” This is not to discount, and it should be noted, as Taun also points out, “each culture has its own symbols of intimacy, widely recognized by its people.”¹⁰ Through myriad phenomenological meanings the home is conceptualized through myriad and varied semiotic associations representing everything from place and placeness on one end of the intimacy gradient to personal shelter and protection at the other.

In *The Poetics of Space*, French philosopher and phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard establishes that to understand home or house phenomenologically, one cannot really think of it as an ‘object.’ He poses the question, ‘can we isolate an intimate, concrete essence that would be a justification of the uncommon value of all of our images of protected intimacy?’ Bachelard states that any psychologist, or phenomenologist has to go beyond “enumerating their picturesque features and analyzing for which reasons they are comfortable, but seize upon the germ of the essential, immediate well-being it encloses... to find the original shell.” Through that process, relating to these “intimate values of the inside space”, the representation of home, whether semiotic or literary, derives an ontological, symbolic meaning ‘prove imagination augments the values of reality.’¹¹

In psychologist Judith Sixmith’s paper, *The Meaning of Home: An Exploratory Study of Environmental Experience* published in the book *Readings in Environmental Psychology* edited by Linda Groat, Sixmith looks for answers in a research study on the phenomenology of home using 22 post-graduates as the source for her data sample. Her research yielded 164 ‘sortings’ which were then organized into 20 different phenomenological categories of meaning related to home, and three experiential modes: personal, social and physical.

The highest rated was the category of belonging (17), followed by happiness and



self-expression (14). Aside from this being a certain amount of quantifiable proof of the symbolic meaning of home tied to identity, what I found notable about her results given that these are clearly phenomenologically so related to identity is that other than Proshansky's work, Sixsmith points out there is still not a lot of substantial research on the role self and self-identity where it relates to aspects of places, especially in regard to the formation of attaching one's self identity to the environmental meaning of place.¹² Sixsmith's research provides a valuable model and method to draw upon and expound on in building intended patterns of design for the sense of place design ecology.

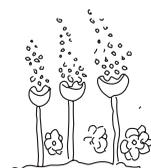
Proshansky, Taun, Hooks, Berry, Bachelard, Sixsmith, and the Resilience Alliance are pathways for rethinking design with regard to understanding the personal element of sense of place, where human beings' personal relationship with place is of great importance to their sense of self as influenced by physical surroundings, family, heritage, natural environment, space, and phenomenological and semiotic representation. An additional discovery of environmental meaning of place, while considered important by scholars, is recognized as an area that has not by their accounting been researched enough. This provides future opportunities for focus.

Perceptions, Senses and Sensations

We interact physically with our place through the five known senses: touch, taste, sight, smell, and sound. There are two lesser known senses which scientists believe have a genetic basis—vestibular and proprioception. According to the 7 Senses Foundation, “The vestibular system explains the perception of our body in relation to gravity, movement and balance. The vestibular system measures acceleration, g-force, body movements and head position. Examples of the vestibular system in practice include knowing that you are moving when you are in an elevator, knowing whether you are lying down or sat up, and being able to walk along a balance beam.

Proprioception is the sense of the relative position of neighboring parts of the body and strength of effort being employed in movement. This sense is very important in letting us know exactly where our body parts are, how we are positioned in space and to plan our movements. Examples of our proprioception in practice include being able to clap our hands together with our eyes closed, write with a pencil and apply with correct pressure, and navigate through a narrow space.”¹³

These senses create spatial relationships and perceptions. This is where motion sickness and vertigo originate. Test pilots and astronauts have had to manage these senses for decades. When designers are creating augmented and virtual realities, they are tapping into our vestibular system and our sense of proprioception. As a result, virtual reality sickness occurs in some people in the same way motion sickness does in the real world. “Not unlike motion sickness or seasickness, VR sickness has its roots in the mismatch



between the visual and vestibular systems,” according to Jorge Serrador, a professor of pharmacology, physiology and neuroscience at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, who was interviewed in 2016 on the subject for Live Science.¹⁴

Proprioception is also referred to as kinesthesia, the sense that lets us perceive the location, movement, and action of parts of the body. It allows us to locate our own body parts, and those of others close to us, even in complete darkness. These spatial perception senses are important to sense of place because they are the foundational to sensing space and place physiologically. They influence how we sense ourselves in a space and place, whether that space-place is as small as a classroom or as large as an urban city.

Taun points out that other useful considerations with physiological perceptions of time and space. “The experiential of space and time is largely subconscious. We have a sense of place because we can move and of time because, as a biological being, we undergo recurrent phases of tension and ease. The movement that gives us a sense of place it itself the resolution of tension. When we stretch our limbs, we experience space and time simultaneously. Space is the freedom of physical constraint and time in which tension is followed by ease.”¹⁵

Heritage and History

Our personal relationship with place is greatly influenced by our own personal heritage and the history of our place. While these two work in concert together, they are two different things. Awareness and sensitivity to the distinction is important to have in general, but especially when examining how they inform rethinking design. Heritage is subjective. Personal heritage influence's identity and sense of self. Places and people are influenced by cultural heritage. On the other hand, history is objective. History can be socio-cultural, political, and natural. History affects heritage.

Therefore, each individual's heritage has been affected differently by the history of place. An example of personal heritage is when a person inherits something in the past, which belonged to a family member or other person of meaning. It can be tangible, intangible, material, ideological or philosophical. Heritage isn't just sentimentality, or the passing down of an meaningless object. According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, heritage is “a process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present.”¹⁶

Heritage is a form of remembering the ties the present to the past through a collective temporality that includes experiences, memories, traditions, beliefs, customs, values, artifacts, and all the ways of being and living that can be passed down through generations creating layers upon layers that influence one's identity either directly or indirectly. This temporal process engages with acts of remembering turning geographic location into sense of belonging and place. They absorb the life force of the process. History





Grandmothers Mary Ann (Blanchard) Matherne, Edith (Austin) Johnson, great grandmother Elvire (Arceneaux) Matherne (seated), and myself.



does this same thing, but on a macro level on the other end of the intimacy gradient. It is a general accounting of the timeline of past people, events, and activities. It also includes the tangible material artifacts, objects, and buildings. When historians and other scholars talk about keeping history or heritage alive, it refers to including the events and experiences in the temporality of a place's past within our collective consciousness of the present.

As Taun points out, connection to ancestral heritage as ancient roots in human civilization.¹⁷ By extension, an attachment to place, or homeland, deepens. Sadly, too often in human history, this has taken a destructive turn. When combined with attachment to heritage, attachment to place as homeland has led to human beings destroying or displacing other humans, developing a distorted view of their homeland being superior, more worthy or the center of the universe ideologically. That is not what sense of place is about, or what a sense of place design ecology is about. Elements of influence such as accessing human beings' innate psychological attachment to homeland, rootedness in soil and nature, and connection to the temporality of the heritage and history are part of the framework's underlying theory and methodology for rethinking design, and for purposes of being a catalyst for sense of place.

However, they should never be distorted, or used for anything else other than serving the ethic of building a stronger connection between humans and cultures with nature. Any other use that would be vehemently rejected. There are so many reasons, too many to expound upon at this time, that history and heritage should be revered, engaged, and valued. Likewise, there are many areas history and heritage influences and affects the human component of sense of place including forming one's own self identity, perceptions, and cultural engagement.

Taun shares his determination about the role of time in our sense of place. "Sense of time affects sense of place. As one lives on, the past lengthens. What does the past mean to us? People look back for various reasons, but shared by all is the need to acquire a sense of self and of identity. I am more than what the thin present defines. I am more than someone who at this moment is struggling to put thought into word...to strengthen our sense of self the past needs to be rescued and made accessible."¹⁸

Solitude and Togetherness

Writer Henry David Thoreau shared candidly and directly about his affinity for solitude in *Walden*, his book centered around his place. "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude."¹⁹ Solitude is not easily found common state of being today as it was in 1854. We have to work a little harder in this world filled with technology, distractions, pressures, expectations, and just plain noise. Being in solitude or alone as a concept today



is even culturally suspect. As I was researching, and conceptualizing this characteristic of how humans how experience place, the world was struck with the global viral pandemic COVID-19. Massive quarantines and stay-at-home lock down orders were mandated. Suddenly togetherness could literally be deadly. Solitude was now not a choice we made as respite from noisy, busy places. Instead, solitude is something we do to reduce risk of contracting a deadly virus, and because of that, has become part of way of life and ways of being in our place not experienced since the Spanish Flu in 1918. For months, we were unable to experience any part of previously known ways of living in togetherness, or engage with the cultural aspects of place in physical proximity to one another. While lock-downs have lifted to varying degrees, ways of being and living are still not what they once were. Personally, I am experiencing what it means to miss my city of New Orleans even though I am physically still here. Unbelievable as it may be, this is not the first time I've had that sensory experience relating to my place. It was very similar during a small period of time right after Hurricane Katrina. We were living in a FEMA trailer in the backyard

while rebuilding the house. We were here. But the senses and the sensations that make up the life force of the city hadn't fully materialized yet.

It has felt like living in an alternate universe, or in some augmented intelligence version. On the surface it is New Orleans, yet it hasn't been. However, it didn't take long though for the city to resuscitate. Not long at all compared to the pandemic. This time is much worse. This is a profound ongoing personal and cultural experience related to human relationship to place happening in real-time that has given me personally an accessible and real-world understanding of the influences of solitude and togetherness on one's experience of place. It is an experience that has contributed in a profound way to deepening the process of developing this entire thesis and a deeper sense of purpose in developing the sense of place design ecology framework that has resulted from it.

Space is a biological necessity to all animals, according to cultural anthropologists and scientists. Having lived in a FEMA trailer for almost two years, I can attest to that fact. However, feeling the need for space isn't necessarily about actual physical space. I made an outdoor room of sorts for myself in the backyard, which was tiny in square footage, but exponentially made me feel less cramped. As for psychological space, at that time, there just wasn't as many people in the city and to a certain extent after all the initial chaos was gone, sometimes it had the quietness atypical for New Orleans. It felt the same during the lock down months of COVID-19. Only that felt like we were living in a ghost town. Acutely showing me the way people come together physically makes a place come alive with an energy that can't be replaced.

There are tropes in modern American society referring to getting space that we refer to as getting away from it all, unplugging, or going off line. We use these tropes to refer to all the myriad aspects of modern living and being that after experiencing them for awhile, humans need a break from all the togetherness, sensory overload, and physical crowding that are characteristic of many urban places. It begs the question, if humans



are always needing to seek refuge away from these things and get space, why don't we incorporate more space in our daily ways of living and being? How much of this is really about physical space, and how much of it is a lack of feeling an intimate connection to place that can sometimes only happen in solitude? Overcrowding, which can be physical, emotional or sensory, can cause fatigue and distraction. Overcrowding whether physical or perceived can disrupt mindfulness, and lead to disassociation our socio-cultural surroundings and the natural environment.

As Bachelard investigates through the poetic imagery of house and home, he determines the roots of inhabiting is a function of solitude. Using the home as the ultimate form of inhabiting, he calls this 'finding the original shell' a daydream of returning to the primitiveness of the refuge of one's shelter. In our "hut dreams we hope to live elsewhere, far from the over-crowded house, far from the city cares. We flee in thought in search of a real refuge."²⁰

According to Bachelard, connecting to a personally intimate place like one's own home, or the way a bird's nest phenomenologically connects us through to inhabiting through imagination brings "a return to the field of the primitive images that had perhaps been centers of fixation for the recollections left in our memories." As far addressing these needs into our daily lives, he asks the rhetorical question, what if we had an image of a dwelling to represent every time we experienced those feelings and needs. "How many dwelling places there would be, fitted one into another if we were to realize in detail... all the images by means of which we live our daydreams of intimacy. How many scattered values we should succeed in concentrating, if we lived the images of our daydreams in all sincerity."²¹

He is careful to assert this is not an indulgence of nostalgia, but a way into our own consciousness of being, into the phenomenology of the imagination. "They give us back areas of being, in which the human being's *certainty of being* is concentrated."²² Being conscious and aware enough to recognize these symbolic and poetic images and their meaning through imagination requires a mental stillness that solitude provides. As Tuan establishes in *Spaces and Places*, "privacy and solitude are necessary for sustained reflection and a hard look at self, and through the understanding of self to the full appreciation of other personalities." To access this, one should seek to develop deep an inward consciousness but should also seek human beings Tuan says "with whom prolonged exchange—opening up worlds in sustained conversation or common enterprise—ought to be possible."²³

I find that in practicing this, I can attain conscious awareness of place, even in crowded areas, something that Tuan also points out in his discussion. On the other end of place experience spectrum from solitude is togetherness. Cultural anthropologists have established that human beings are inherently social beings. As Taun points out, even "a crowd can be exhilarating." Spaciousness is often a matter of perception not

physicality. Two people in love (or lust) can be crammed in backseat of a small car feels like togetherness. Yet two people at odds with one another in a large room can feel too crowded. They are both spatial experiences, with divergent experiences in relation to the actual physical space. Sharing experiences in a space and place with others, especially people who we care about or with whom we share a mission, purpose, ideology, or cause can bring forth incredible positive psychological and physiological reactions that make us feel really good.

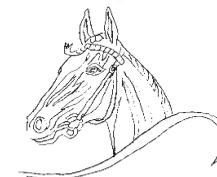
"People crowd us but they also enlarge our world. Heart and mind expand in the presence of those we admire and love. When people work together for a common cause, one man does not derive the other of space; rather he increases it for his colleague by giving him support."²⁴ People interact differently with place when we are in solitude versus in the company of other people, but perception can override both.

Crowd mentality is a verifiable psychological condition that can influence individuals with weaker belief systems into adopting different values and behaviors than they would engage if they were in solitude. I was fortunate to have two parents who were both staunch individualists and critical thinkers, and indoctrinated me and my brother with that resolve. Perhaps some of it was passed on by way of our ancestors through collective unconsciousness that connects us, or nature as much as nurture. No person has the power or ability to influence me to do or believe anything as part of a group that I would not as an individual person. I wonder if the 'don't jump off a bridge just because everyone else is doing it' parent-to-child talk is still a thing.

Spaciousness doesn't always equal solitude. I became perfectly adjusted to my FEMA trailer and my adjoining outdoor room. On the flip side, as we have come to find out living in the time of COVID-19, our digital advancements have afforded us numerous ways to our virtually connect through video conferencing, as replacement for physically being in the same space. In fact, we have an overabundance of ways for connecting and communicating using digital technology.

Yet with all the ease and choices, psychologists argue and observe that we are more disconnected from one another than ever before. I believe it isn't so much a state of disconnection as it is the *perception* of disconnection because of all the possibilities we know we could connect. Before we had these methods, did we really feel that disconnected? It is as if the methods and the media for connection actually create the perception of disconnection. Has the overloaded of possibilities and ease of access become another thing from which we need to get 'space'?

In a post-COVID-19 way of life, opportunities for togetherness has to be planned, scheduled, and spatially arranged. According to psychologists, not having human physical touch or direct interaction in proximity to other humans over a period of time has psychological detriments too. Just like spaciousness doesn't always feel like solitude, Being close to other people doesn't always feel crowded. This varies from culture to



culture. It is extremely important to be aware and sensitive to this fact. On balance, at our core bio-physically and psychologically, humans are social beings that thrive on physical togetherness and socio-cultural bonding. Imagination, creativity, ideas, and critical thought are all enhanced by togetherness, either accompanied by physical space or not.

Yet in the world of social media and so much digital interconnectedness and overexposure, the value and importance of solitude, privacy even, have been forsaken. Solitude nurtures the intimate connection with place, especially nature, that is so important. Place identity is shaped in our world today by social and shared experiences, if not more so, than by solitude. Solitude should be something that we embrace more as part of increasing awareness and consciousness.

The varying gradients of intimacy in which we interact with place have the ability to teach us about ourselves and our relationships with others. Whether in solitude, small groups, or large gatherings they are direct experiences that provide layers to our place meaning and identity. Ironically before COVID-19, solitude was our challenge. Now it is finding togetherness. The quest to achieve balance between the two continues. One thing is for certain, both are crucial to creating sense of self and sense of place.

Patterns of Modern Human Mobility

People move more than ever before in human history. Some people move by choice, others are forced to move. The patterns of human moving around the planet has an affect on place meaning and place identity which create sense of place and place stewardship. In his paper, "Place-Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self", Harold Proshansky points out that migration, incarceration and interment as major events where sense of self and place identity are greatly affected, even disrupted, by a person's physical settings (space) and place. In his study on migrant farmers' children, who are constantly being moved from one place to another according to the growing season, their aspects of their place identity and attachment become affected by a 'fragmented self-concept.'²⁵

Refugees who have had to flee their homes and homelands due to political, social, or climate reasons, as well as those incarcerated or people held in internment, suffer similar psychological effects according to sociologists. One recent example comes from as recent as 2018 when Central American refugees who had to flee their own country due to gang crime, poverty, and other conditions. Upon arriving at the U.S., they were forced into border internment camps, with children cruelly separated from parents. These children have suffered unthinkable psychological and physical acute trauma. While there are more immediate rectifications to be made for them, in thinking about sense of place and these children, one can't help wonder about the lasting traumatic effects to the psychological development of their sense of self and identity because of this profound disruption to their physical space and place.



Another example are the prisoners who are incarcerated for long periods of time and then are reintroduced to society, often in a completely different places than where they came from or knew. The U.S. incarcerates more people per capita than any other nation on Earth. Between local jails, state and federal prisons, 2.3 million are locked behind bars living in a space 8 feet by 8 feet or smaller. Many are not allowed to go outside and never breathe fresh air. Almost a million those (910,000) are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes. Thousands are incarcerated for long periods of time because of low-level drug possession without intent to distribute. Often due to the misguided and frankly racist drug possession statues and laws. In other words, thousands of drug users of the drug are locked up instead of put through any kind of drug treatment program.²⁶

Others have to move because of environmental changes such as sea level rise, or sinking ground, or both. The people of Isle de Jean Charles are a community in the bayou region of southeast Louisiana. They are the first community in the U.S. that has to be entirely relocated because the waters of the Gulf of Mexico are rising, and the southeast Louisiana is sinking. Later, in the discussion on culture, I detail their new reality and how relates to place. There is a saying that the world is shrinking It is a conceptual perception that planet is actually shrinking smaller and smaller, due to globalization, patterns of movement, and digital technology. Objects, people, and information are traveling around the globe at exponentially growing speed and quantity.

As Edward Relph, creator of the website placeness.com explains, "Mobility broadens experiences and reduces parochialism, yet also contributes to the need for non-places and weakens long-term commitments to particular places. The increased mobility that began with railways, and was dramatically reinforced by the invention of motor vehicles and airplanes."²⁷ As Relph points out, we experience places through windows. Even more so now, we experience places through computer screens. Both of which affect interactions each other and our interactions, or lack thereof, with nature of place.

As Relph shares, the devolving of places into non-places. One of the largest shifts in perception that globalization has successfully planted into our psyche is that a community is only a group of people with whom we have shared interests. Even modern dictionaries have now included that interpretation of the word in their primary definition. The etymology of the word 'community' comes from the 14th century Latin, referring to 'a number of people associated together by the fact of residence in the same locality' and 'the common people' (not the rulers or the clergy), from Latin *communitatem* (*nominative communitas*) 'community, society, fellowship, friendly intercourse; courtesy, condescension, affability,' from *communis*, 'common, public, general, shared by all or many'; and from Old French *comunité* 'community, commonness, everybody' (Modern French *communauté*),²⁸

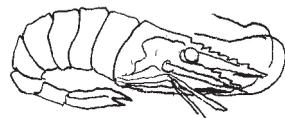
Over time, as societies grew larger and split up into sub-groups, the word came to mean more about shared interests than 'by fact of residence in the same locality.' In ecology terms, the word is used in reference to a group of interdependent plants or animals

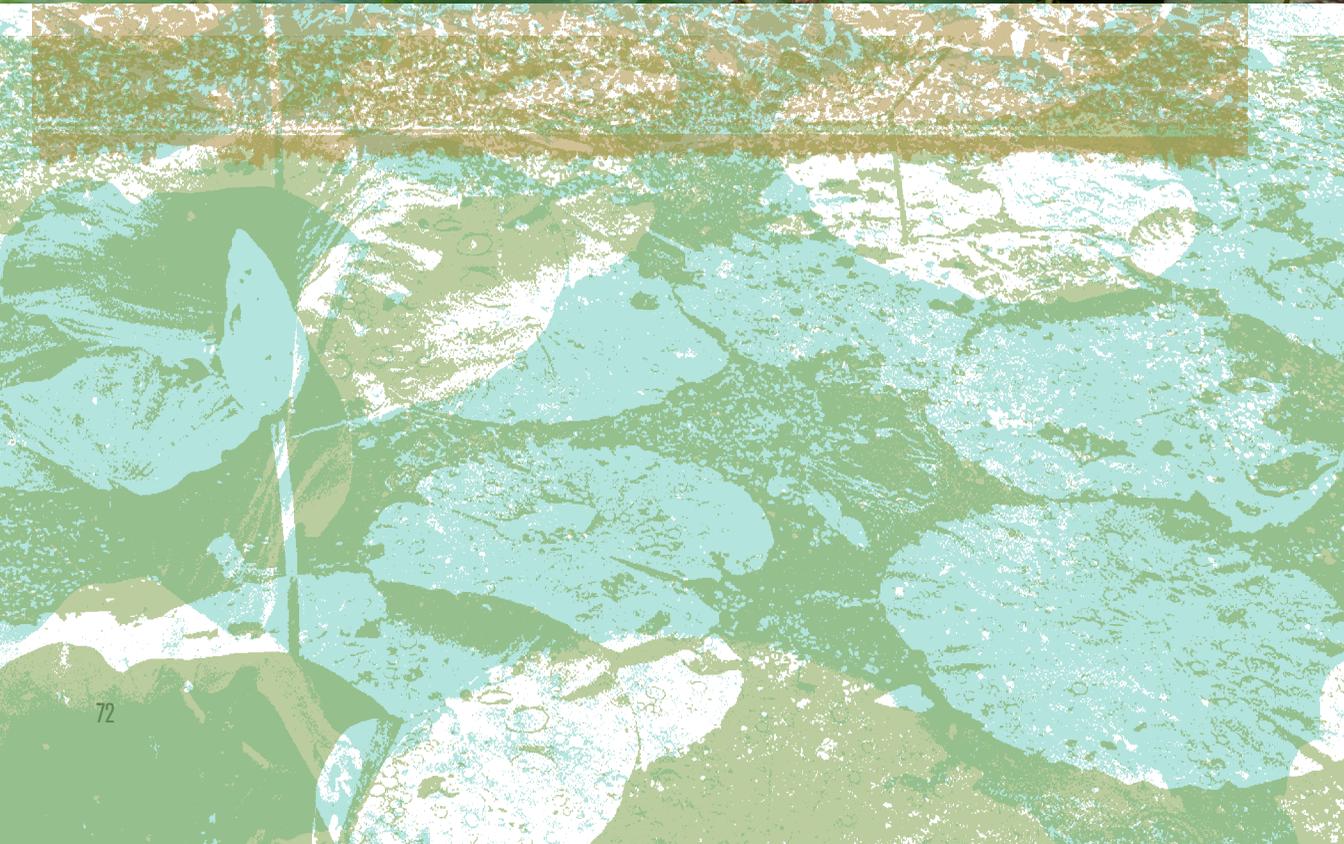


growing or living together in natural conditions or occupying a specified habitat. Our modern global and mobile existence has abandoned the local component of community that is required to for place-making, forming place identity, meaning, and sense of place. Relph shares the astute perspectives on places becoming non-places from Joshua Meyrowitz, professor of communication at the department of Communication at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, and anthropologist Marc Augé.

“In 1995, French anthropologist Marc Augé’s book *Non-Places: Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity* expressed a different idea—that non-places are the parts of modern built environments without history, culture, or residents, such as hospitals, expressway service stations, shopping malls and airports. In these non-places experiences are contractual and temporary because we are patients, customers, have bought a ticket and are passing through on our way somewhere else. They are convenient, efficient, and largely anonymous because they have to be comprehensible to people with diverse backgrounds. They are essential in a mobile society.”²⁹ Relph shares Meyerowitz’s points on the great detriment non-places have on communities. “At a larger social scale, Joshua Meyerowitz argued in his book *No Sense of Place*, that ‘Where one is, has less and less to do with what one knows and experiences.’ In other words, social relationships are no longer dependent on local communities. The web has no landscape, no geography, and the communities that form there are non-place communities formed on the basis of shared interests.”³⁰

With social media’s influence on society’s collective psyche, humans’ view of their own identities shifting, and socio-cultural systems disconnecting ways of being from the nature of place, the demands to perceptions and experience of place, especially the nature of place are immense. What does place mean? What does community mean? What roles do locality and physical surroundings play in our lives? The evolving answers to these questions provide clues to loss of place stewardship and place meaning, but also pathways of opportunity to rethinking design as a catalyst for sense of place.





Nature

Elements relating to the phenomena of the natural world

Seen and Unseen Nature

What is nature? Why are we drawn to nature? How does it relate to our connection place? What are the connections between nature and culture? These are questions scientists, anthropologists, philosophers and psychologists have been arguing and studying for thousands of years. Pursuing answers as been especially front and center today as our natural environment is pushed to the physical and psychological outskirts of daily life, while at the same time wild places on our planet shrink.

Physical surroundings are an essential component to place, so it is also one of the three necessary requirements and components to sense of place also. Likewise, nature is foundational to design. The word nature can be used to refer to plants, animals, or even weather. In context of sense of place and the design ecology, nature refers not only to the individual aspects of nature, but to the whole of the natural world, our natural environmental surroundings and all the flora and fauna that are a part of it.

Seen and unseen nature influences consciousness and unconsciousness, psyche and physiology. As part of the natural world, humans are unconsciously connected to unseen nature through universal principles—its physics and metaphysics. Unconsciously and consciously, humans identify with the nature we do see—the flora, fauna, animals, and landscapes—all the spatial, environmental, and material characteristics of nature. To really appreciate the depth of how and why humans are so connected to nature, even if it is at an unconscious level, and then use that understanding to rethink design, its helpful to gain an understanding of the natural world at its most fundamental core level.

Different cultures around the world have developed their own philosophies, definitions, and practices surrounding approaches to nature. Generally, philosophy has been divided into Western vs. Eastern schools of thought. However, there are multiple schools of thought originating independently from the ancient cultures of the world and the places they originated—Africa, South America, and Australian continents and Ancient Mesopotamia (the Middle East).

One of the core foundations of a sense of place design ecology's theory is the inherent value, benefits, and essential role played by immersing and imbibing oneself with one's natural surroundings, as a methodology for rethinking design in a general theoretical way, but for purposes of being a catalyst for sense of place. Neither Western nor Eastern philosophy is monolithic when it comes to the natural world. Chinese and Indian schools of thought are two main branches, but certainly not the only ones. Indian branches into





**“Whenever we enter the land, sooner or later
we pick up the scent of our own histories.”**

— William Least Heat-Moon

over half a dozen branches, each with their own ideas and philosophy to nature. It is a rich, diverse territory to explore.¹ Yet, there are shared commonalities. The study of how schools of thought around the world think about and approach nature, and then how they visually and semiotically represent nature through culture, is a vast, fascinating, and diverse territory to explore—too large of a landscape to traverse at this moment. I look forward to going on a comparison study journey soon on semiotic representations of nature among various cultures. For this examination, the journey begins in ancient Greece.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) is largely credited with creating the academic discipline of studying the natural world from every perspective—physically, metaphorically, aesthetically, and ethically. He used the word *phusis* which meant “growing, producing.” It was a description of a scientific, physical process, but it also referred to a psychological and philosophical connotation. It is the potential to be something, the actuality of becoming, and the ‘essential character or constitution and distinguishing qualities or properties of something.’ In other words, the nature of things.² It was only much later in history that the word *nature* came to be used to refer to everything from weather to taking a walk in the woods. The word’s connotation is not just the physical act of placing oneself in a forest.

Nature conjures psychological, metaphysical, and physiological reactions within an individual by way of interacting with aspects of the natural world—as writer Wendell Berry, philosopher and phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, and psychologist Carl Jung have all suggested in one way or another—being in nature is like having a reunion between oneself and the physics and phenomena of the natural world.

Consider a seashell. Seashells are not shed and replaced with a bigger shell like a crab shell. The shell must enlarge to allow for the animal inside to grow. A mollusk or other organism takes in materials (matter) like calcium, protein and other minerals from its environment, and secretes them. As it goes through this transformation process, the exoskeleton grows larger, develops, and evolves over time in a specific pattern. The agent of its growth, what causes it, happens because the mollusk is growing and the shell must expand to allow for that growth. It has the potentiality to do this by the nature of its matter, and the particular characteristics of its form. The pattern and the spiral shape of a seashell form happen universal formula of ratio and proportion related to the Fibonacci Sequence and the Golden Section, or phi.

Aristotle describes this process as four ‘causes’.

1. Matter/Material cause – what is something made of?
2. Agent/Efficient cause – what brings something about?
3. Formal cause – what characteristics does an object have?
4. Final cause – what is the reason for something’s existence?



There is also process that includes substance. The substance of something is more than just matter and agent that bring about form. Substance is something more in the way that gestalt is something more than the sum of its parts. It involves the question of the *nature of being* as opposed to only the question of its physical existence of being. The essence (or soul) of a being, as Aristotle called it, is brought into existence by its form, but it is greater than just the sum of material and form.

As Fritjof Capra writes in his book *Web of Life*, “by means of form this essence becomes real, or actual. Aristotle calls it *entelechy* ‘self-completion.’ It is a process of development, a thrust toward self-realization. Matter and form are the two sides of this process, separable only through abstraction.”⁵ All things have substance, and this is one of the things that connects us—a recognition of substance in other beings. Aristotle drew upon his methodology to create the science and philosophy of biology—the study of living things and the origins of life. It led to zoology, botany, ecology, and other life sciences. Equally monumental was Aristotle’s argument that unseen nature is as important as the nature we see, and that they are not separate concerns. Physics and metaphysics, even a framework of ethics, are interconnected.

Aristotle created several works from his methodology and system of studying and classifying animals including *History of Animals*. His pupil, Theophrastus, used the same method for plants. Aristotle’s book *On the Soul* addresses how he approached the concept of the soul (substance or essence). All living beings have an essence, even plants. Essence (soul) is tied to the existence of form, matter, potentiality, and actuality. Plants grow and reproduce. They have a process and a system for doing things, and they have individuality—therefore, they have essence.

They can’t feel the way animals can, or rationalize the way humans can, but they possess an essence of their own, according to Aristotle’s philosophy of living things. It is this essence that is attached to their basic life process of reproducing and processing matter for life and growth, turning them into individual classifications of all kinds each with their own unique abilities. He referred to this as a study which explained ‘the nature of sensation.’ He went on to study specific senses (touch, sight, taste) in *Sense and Sensibilia*.⁶ Together, these studies and their concepts provide a foundation and understanding for how matter and form, potentiality, and actuality connect with substance and essence, and how they all come together to create a seen and unseen living world. We are not separate from the physics or the phenomena of nature. We are a part of the materiality, but also instinct, experiences, senses and sensibilities. They both happen in our consciousness and unconsciousness. The objectiveness of materiality and physicality is not the entirety of our reality. There are also perceptions, senses, and sensations of the unseen, and sensory world that actually make life full of essence, substance that enhance our possibilities and our ontological nature of being.

As David Abram writes in *Spell of the Sensuous*, “the everyday world in which we hunger



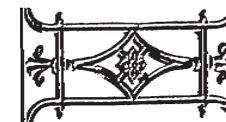
and make love is hardly the mathematical determined ‘object’ toward which the sciences direct themselves. Despite all the mechanical artifacts that now surround us, the world in which we find ourselves before we set out to calculate and measure it is not an inert or mechanical object but a living field, an open and dynamic landscape subject to its own mood and metamorphoses”⁷

Pierce on Signs, edited by James Hoopes, includes writings from Pierce's unfinished book in which Pierce explores ‘metaphysical categories.’ Being fairly obsessed with triads and triadic relationships, Pierce asserts triadic relationships in physiology, psychology, physics, sociology, three kinds of consciousness (or thought) that coordinate with his triadic relations of signs: feeling (activated nerve-endings), a dual sense of action and reaction (external nerve-based ‘muscle’ energy and internal visceral sensations), and synthetic consciousness. Pierce explains this third consciousness is “the process of learning, which is the preeminent ingredient and quintessence of reason.”⁸

As Hoopes explains, Pierce's framing of the triadic relationship of thought “involving a third object enabled Pierce to describe thought as a process of triadic relations involving representation of the first object by the sign (third) and the interpretation of the sign by the interpretant (second).”⁹ Pierce's theories bring to mind another to rethink how we are able to unconsciously connect with nature through geometric shapes and patterns in a sensory way, which is the impetus of expressing subjective experience through abstract, geometric forms. Perceptions nature based on instincts and sensations provides a way of tapping into a collective unconscious and nature's universal language.

Nature speaks in a language of semiotic with these cosmic geometries, and through materiality and imagery, creating place meaning. For example, when threads of moss gently sway from a cypress tree and an pungent, organic aroma wafts from plant material in the water as my canoe slowly glides across, distracting a blue heron who was previously poised in stillness and intent focus towards his prey.

This experience manifests in proven physiological responses that happen within my body unconsciously. My heart rate slows. My blood pressure decreases. These are part of our unseen nature. They combine with a conscious interpretation that is learned through social conditioning and culture, but also perhaps the collective unconscious. This creates a semiotic moment that imprints into my psyche. Archetypal symbols begin to take shape, culminating in a phenomenology of place that creates place identity and meaning.



Biophilia: The Human Relationship With Nature

Biophilia is defined as the innate connection humans feel (either consciously or unconsciously) towards nature, elements of the natural world, and all living systems. The term biophilia was used by German-born American psychoanalyst Erich Fromm in a controversial book at the time that he published late in his career and life, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), which described biophilia as “the passionate love of life and of all that is alive.”¹⁰ The word *philia* originates from Ancient Greece as a term for brotherly love. Aristotle uses it to mean ‘friendship and affection,’ as opposed to romantic love. (As a side note, Aristotle wrote extensively on this subject of friendship, ethics and love, as did Plato and other Greek philosophers.) As Fromm describes it, “Biophilia is the passionate love of life and of all that is alive; it is the wish to further growth, whether in a person, a plant, an idea, or a social group. The biophilous person prefers to construct rather than to retain. He wants to be more rather than to have more. He is capable of wondering,

and he prefers to see something new rather than to find confirmation of the old. He loves the adventure of living more than he does certainty. He sees the whole rather than only the parts, structures rather than summations. He wants to mold and to influence by love, reason, and example.”¹¹ E.O. Wilson later developed and popularized Biophilia hypothesis, describing it as the “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes.” In his book *Biophilia*, he discusses how humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. He defines biophilia as “the urge to affiliate with other forms of life.”¹² His description provides a pathway for understanding how we connect to nature and adds to Aristotle’s theories on the way all beings in the natural physical world share unseen processes. Wilson adds the sensory component.

“In *Biophilia*, Wilson shared his conservation ethic based on multiple dimensions of the innate relationship humans share with nature. His notion of environmental stewardship drew on various concepts, including the practical dependence of humans on nature, which centers on the ecological services (e.g., clean water and soil) nature provides; the satisfaction derived from direct interaction with nature, such as through exploration and development of outdoor skills; the physical appeal of nature, evident in its role as a source of inspiration and peace; and the human attachment to nature in the form of emotional connections to landscapes and animals.”¹³

Biophilia is an abstract concept to describe a sensory experience that can be quantified by both emotional and physical reactions, like in my canoe experience. It requires physical surroundings for the phenomena to occur. In that way the concept of biophilia is a lot like sense of place which makes sense since biophilia is a contributing factor. The feeling one gets from the unseen pull of nature is the biophilic language spoken by our instincts and unconscious connection as organic beings made of the same elements and processes as nature, and through our psychic, collective unconscious, and biological connection to our ancestors. In other words, it is human nature to be attached to nature.



With his Biophilia hypothesis, Wilson also addresses an ethic which is close to stewardship. He addresses this even more strongly in his recent book *Half Earth*, and the Half-Earth Project where he and his foundation are arguing and working for the need leave one half of the Earth untouched by humans “to protect half the land and sea in order to manage sufficient habitat to reverse the species extinction crisis and ensure the long-term health of our planet.”¹⁴ It is an intriguing proposal, but it doesn't solve the problem that nature needs to be more of a partner, stakeholder and participant in our individual ways of being and our cultural ways of life. Sociologists point out that nature has been pushed too far from our everyday experience and line of sight.

As Carl Jung explains from his decades long study of the human psyche, we need a reunion with our archaic human ancestry. There is a need for a return to the wisdoms of archaic man.¹⁵ David Abram writes in *Spell of the Sensuous*, “Thus the living world—this ambiguous realm that we experience in anger and joy, in grief and in love—is both the soil in which all our sciences are rooted and the rich humus into which their results ultimately return, whether as nutrients or as poisons. Our spontaneous experience of the world, charged with subjective, emotional, and intuitive content, remains the vital and dark ground of all our objectivity.”¹⁶ Objectivity will only get us so far. To truly be connected to a place, one has to open our instinctual nature of being.

The Reciprocity and Ethic of Nature

Before Wilson and Fromm, Aldo Leopold (conservationist, forester, philosopher, educator, and writer) wrote *A Sand County Almanac* in 1949 which included an essay called “The Land Ethic,” a call to action for moral responsibility to the natural world. At its core, the idea of a land ethic is about strengthening the relationships between people, land, animals, plants, culture and nature. Leopold wrote, it “simply enlarges the boundaries of the community” to include not only humans, but also soils, waters, plants, and animals—or what Leopold called “the land.”¹⁷

“Leopold recognized that his dream of a widely accepted and implemented set of values based on caring—for people, for land, and for all the connections between them—would have to “evolve...in the minds of a thinking community.”¹⁸ Going forward 20 years or so, in the 1970s people living in cities were choking under a thick cloud of pollution. This prompted the creation of the Environmental Protection Act, clean air and water laws. It also sparked warning cries, urgent calls for social action and response from a collection of environmentally conscious thinkers. Product designer, educator and writer Victor Papanek picked up the torch as one of the very first designers to connect this view with the discipline of design. Papanek argued passionately but very logically in his book *Design for the Real World* for the urgency of product design to become engaged in stewardship of nature through socially and ecologically responsible design advocacy, application,



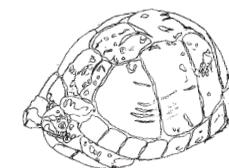
and discourse.¹⁹ He followed with the book *The Green Imperative* in which he addressed modern advancement, and more practically dug into methods and frameworks for approaching this ethic.²⁰ Wendell Berry, who wrote fictional stories with themes of land, community, and agriculture, began writing nonfiction essays in the 1970s on the same subject. Berry's work sounds an alarm on how the fabric of what holds humans, culture and nature together is not just fraying, but disintegrating altogether. One of Berry's most prophetic essays, *Solving for Pattern* explains that if solutions cause more problems than solve, or disrupts the ‘larger patterns’ within the system, then they really aren't successful solutions. Berry is not a designer, but there is a holistic and systems-based approach to this thinking that came organically to him because of how engaged he is with his place.²¹

Reading Berry's essay, and his other books of that time such as *Unsettling of America* (1977) and *The Gift of Good Land* (1981), provides a striking realization that our 21st century solutions are still not meeting this holistic worldview or systems-based approach to nature being connected to our socio-cultural ecosystems. Berry explains the damage giant heavy tractors do to soil compaction, the affect on animals by confinement and overcrowding, and damage to plants and soil through industrialized monoculture farming, which includes use of pesticides to increase yield, and not rotating crops which kills the living ecosystem in soil. According to Berry, creating solutions that solve for pattern, and the subsequent stewardship it provides, is an ethic and responsibility we have as part of being in the same ecosystem as the natural surroundings that are a part of it.²²

Aristotle linked everything to ethic—biology, government, relationships, physics, art, and even his ‘first philosophy’ on the nature of being, *Metaphysics*. Aristotelis Santas, professor of philosophy and Valsdosta State University published a paper “Aristolian Ethics and Biophilia,” in *Ethics and the Environment Journal* (Spring 2014), in which he argued that biophilia is not just a product of human sentiment (love), but also a manifestation of Aristotle's theory of ethics and reciprocity.

Santas argues that even though Aristotle's works on ethics could be considered ‘decidedly anthropocentric’ today, Aristotle's discussions on ethics and friendship hold a ‘key to the much sought-after theory’ of interspecies relationship, reciprocity and even obligation. He goes on to explain that ‘using Aristotle's theory of obligation as reciprocity within friendship, that such a re-conception of biophilia might provide another approach to founding an environmental ethic on a theory of sentiment.’²³ For stewardship of nature of place to work, people must feel a sense of ethic and responsibility, but that must come from a deep place of personal connection at an instinctual love and affection—a place of pathos driven by undeniable collective unconscious instinct that compels humans on a psychic and visceral level, not just through reason or logic.

To get a full understanding of how biophilia can be an influence to the nature component of sense of place and as a method for rethinking design, we have to be aware of and appreciate human biophobia—the fear of nature—as well. Just as my blood



pressure goes down when I am in nature, someone who has biophobia may have their blood pressure go up. It is also a psychological sensation with physiological responses. Biophobia (just like biophilia) is believed to have something to do with our evolutionary relationship with nature developed over tens of thousands of years from our Ice Age ancestors. This response has to do with flight or fight response, being vulnerable to predators and natural phenomena like lightening and floods. “In our modern world, biophobia also has a lot to do with human beings being completely separated from nature so drastically for so many generations that all of the innate connections that used to be passed down through cultural ways of life and ways of being have just been lost. Matthew J. Wichrowski, M.S.W., H.T.R., writer of "Biophilia: Our Connection to the Natural World" points out that our biophilic tendencies influence our responses to the visuality and materiality that we experience around us in physical surroundings, a key phenomenon to keep in mind for rethinking design and as part of the patterns of design for engaging audiences.

“Interestingly enough our concept of aesthetics is also greatly influenced by our ‘biophilic’ tendencies. The continued popularity of bucolic nature scenes in art supports our liking for certain features in paintings. Some may consider these paintings dull and prefer more modern abstract works, but when a metal abstract sculpture with sharp angles was installed in a major academic medical center where patients with serious illnesses waited, it was eventually taken away because patients complained that it made them feel uncomfortable. Other studies support the stress reducing effects of nature scenery while abstract scenes either have no significant effect or increase the levels of stress indicators.”²⁴

Nature has an unconscious influence to sense of place that draws from biology, physics, and our instinctual relationships to animals, plants and the physical world. It is clear that even though our modern way of life has pulled us away from nature, something in us won't give it up. From Aristotle's philosophy and science, to Carl Jung's psychology of the collective unconscious and archetypes. From Aldo Leopold's ethic to product designer Victor Papanek; writer, farmer and conservationist Wendell Berry; marine biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson; to Erich Fromm, and E.O. Wilson, each has developed his or her own responses. There is a thread clearly showing as a species, we are lured to nature.

As Lippard writes in *Lure of the Local*, “No matter how far culture will go to destroy its connections to nature, humankind and all of our technology, good and bad, are inextricable parts of Nature—the original determinant, the mother and matrix of everything, that all-pervasive structure that lies beneath scenery, landscape, place, and human history.”²⁵



**There are no unsacred places,
there are only sacred place
and desecrated places.**

— Wendell Berry



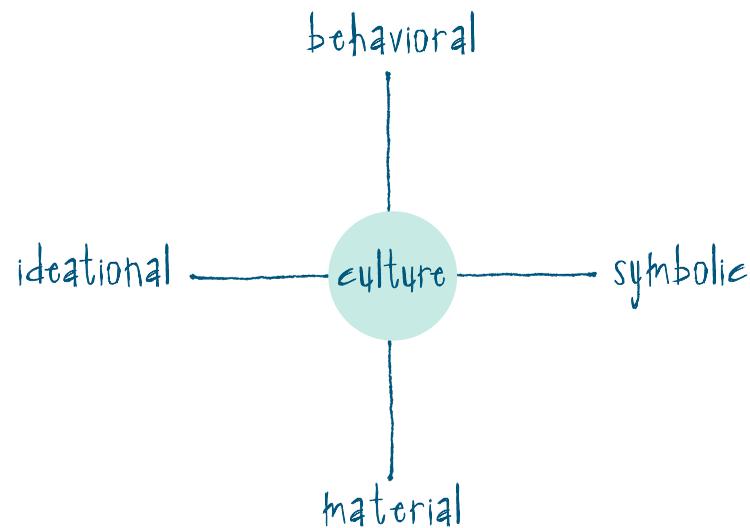
Culture

Elements relating to our collective human experience

Nature provides a kind of reunion with the phenomena of the natural world—a coming together of life processes that join the abstract within the dimensions of physical surroundings. Culture is the result of humans coming together with our own species as social beings within the dimensions of physical surroundings—resulting in ways of living and being. As the Resilience Alliance's researchers point out “For many years, interest in social dimensions of place attachment has been stronger than interest in its physical dimensions (Lewicka (2011:213). Sense of place has been viewed mostly as a social construction, a product of shared behavioral and cultural processes, rather than the result of perceptual and cognitive processes rooted in physical characteristics of settings’ (e.g., Greider and Garkovich 1994).”¹

Culture can be thought of as existing on two axes: ideational/symbolic and material/behavioral. The ideational/symbolic axis refers to the fact that culture exists in our minds: Culture includes the idealized norms and values that we hold in our minds and the symbolic nature of culture, which is understood and interpreted by individuals. Though culture could be conceived as an ideal existing in thought, it is expressed through material production and direct human interaction. Culture is characterized, then, by what people think and what they do. Culture is also reflected and influenced based on the symbolic as signs that exist only in the conscious and unconscious psyche; and as the signs that are expressed as individual and social expressions as objects, visual representations, and other materiality.²

Culture is also not monolithic. It is as diverse as the number of societal groups around the planet. However, there are some common characteristics that cultures generally share that are useful to understand in rethinking design and for building a sense of place design framework. Culture is learned. Culture is an integrated whole and therefore, a system. This means that even though no two individuals within a societal group, or two societal groups in relation to each other, do not have the exactly the same cultural life experience, both will share enough to make social interaction and communication possible. That is to say, as cultural beings, individuals can predict and understand the behavior of other individuals and other social groups—thus enabling a larger social life based on the commonalities of being human. This recognizes the fact that humans do not live by instinct alone; rather, culture mediates our adaptation to the physical environment. To survive, humans acquire culture.”³ There are instances to be aware of and avoided in rethinking design with regard to engaging culture to be more connected with nature and as a catalyst for sense of place such as culture appropriation and the creation of misleading communication that is distorted, exaggerated, stereotyped



It is just as important the two axes of culture— ideational/symbolic axis and the material/behavioral—must intersect. For example, a society can not declare ‘this is our culture’ ideologically, and then not show on some material, visual, or otherwise symbolic proof of that ideology. The symbolic representation, in whatever form that takes, is especially important. “Our lives are shaped by, immersed in, and made possible through symbols. It is through symbols, especially language, that culture is shared, changed, stored, and transmitted over time.”⁴

Through research, anthropologists have established the fact that cultures, especially ones that value instincts, mediate themselves in order to adapt to environment. The natural world, when humans are paying attention, becomes a sort of guiding path by which culture is shaped. There are three areas to explore deeper that can give insight into culture’s role in sense of place where it intersects with other requirements and influences: culture’s relationship to nature, symbolism and visuality of culture, and spatial and temporal influence on culture including significant transitional periods in history that affect culture today.

Ideally culture and nature would be indelibly woven together. However, cultures are increasingly separated from nature. It seems logical to conclude that the decrease in humans’ everyday interaction with the natural environment would be related to the general disassociation. Scholars are beginning to understand more, and gain more interest, in how cultures with a strong daily connection and reverence for their natural environment exhibit that connection symbolically and materially, and how these process work together to influence quality of life, community sustainability and resilience, autonomy, and place stewardship.

Information source for conceptualization: www.anthropology.iresearchnet.com.

Culture's Relationship to People and Nature

The people from southeast Louisiana have built a culture based on a strong relationship with nature. This has been nurtured, cultivated, and passed down over the past 300 years amongst the various unique subsets of culture throughout the bayou region of southeast Louisiana and the city of New Orleans. It is a culture deeply rooted in the seafood that comes from the waters, like shrimp, crawfish, crabs, fish and oysters. It is rooted in the food that comes from its rich alluvial delta soil like satsumas, oranges, sweet potatoes, blackberries, strawberries, okra, rice, and tomatoes. The culture is agriculture focused.

How, when and where to grow a certain crop is the topic of conversation among people here who don't make a living from farming. Seasonality matters and is described through food. Crabs are summer. Shrimp is spring and fall. Oysters are winter. Crawfish are spring. Satsumas and okra are summer. Greens are winter. Strawberries are spring. There is a thread of place knowledge and experience to this kind of cultural connection that creates sense of place and connection to place. Admittedly, I see it waning because it just isn't getting passed down as much as it used to be. My own family on the Matherne side has made a living from the land and water going back ten generations, as have numerous families in the bayou region south of New Orleans. My grandpa made a living farming, mostly okra and potatoes near Bayou Blue where my family has lived for generations, and shrimping from his trawl boat in the waters of Barataria Bay. My formative years were spent immersed in the experiences that this way of life provided and the ways of being it created. As a child I picked acres of okra, and rode in the back of the truck on the way to New Orleans to sell the bushels at the infamous New Orleans Farmers Market.

As a child, I spent hours on the shrimp boat, rocking back and forth as it tugged along with its butterfly nets spread out like wings on either side. There is a relationship to nature people that many people have here that is not just past down through food, although that is a big part of it, but also through recreation, and love of nature. Louisiana is an 'outdoor people' culture to a large extent. Although, a place has more than one culture, more than one way of life and ways of being that is as diverse as the people, which is a good thing.

However, even the fanciest homes of Uptown New Orleans' high society have courtyards flush with flora and fauna for which their owners adore and appreciate. Our culture's biophilia is first and foremost influenced simply by our fortune of having unique and diverse ecosystem and physical surroundings. It is incredibly diverse, rich with meaning, and utterly unique in the world. Having come from this culture, and in being a part of it, I feel blessed. Instead going down some well traveled paths (there will be no discussion of Mardi Gras) this examination will specifically look at instances of culture perhaps lesser thought about along the axes of ideation, symbolism, materiality and behavior, with specific attention to our areas of focus: design, and how people, culture, and nature are interconnected.





Visual Culture

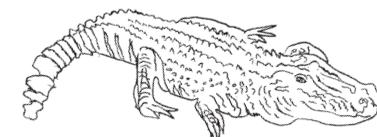
The visuality of a culture is an external representation of its own identity. It can often be looked at as a barometer for a community’s own sense of place. Visuality is often tied to the materiality of culture as well. The abstract, intangible concept of sense of place is represented by the both man-made and natural visuality and materiality: buildings, nature, public spaces, architecture, dress, visual art, sculpture, design, signs and signage. Jonathan Beller, critical thinker and writer on cultural studies and professor at Pratt Institute, explains the history of visual culture’s evolution in his contribution to the *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*.

Beller explains that the way a community represents itself through visual culture “refers to the tangible, or visible, expressions by a people, a state or a civilization, and collectively describes the characteristics of that body as a whole. Although most seamlessly applied to an architectural construction or artistic creation, the evidence of visual culture is not necessarily limited to the most obvious and direct forms of visual expression. The term is most useful for what specific aspects of the visual culture of a people reveal about the people themselves.”¹³

Beller’s critical look at the history of visual culture in society provides perspective on its evolution toward becoming what it is today. “While visual culture has certainly been around as long as culture itself, the phrase ‘visual culture’ used to denote a specific component of culture in general, a set of visual practices, or an academic discipline is quite recent. James Elkins, one of this emerging field’s leading scholars, dates the term from 1972, saying that it “was used perhaps for the first time in Michael Baxandall’s *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*. The more recent interest and prevalence in studying visual culture is important because it indexes a historical shift in the importance of vision itself that has led to an ongoing reconceptualization of the visual and what has been called, in another neologism, *visuality*.”¹⁴

With the democratization of modern day visual culture, all of society’s members contribute to producing and participating with the visuality of culture. This has provided visual culture to be a core influence on entire societal and cultural ways of being—our values, perceptions and behaviors—that influence how we live. This provides individuals and groups to create the semiotics of their own place.

This has also afforded industry, through various media, the opportunity to craft and deliver visual messages that use characteristics the semiotics of place to also shape values, perceptions and behaviors for purpose of turning the receiver role into sender in addition to that of consumer. This construct is fed back into society’s collective psyche in a way that symbolically infuses the media, meaning, message, and receivers’ role as in selling products as part of their cultural role. Through the power of semiotic messaging and the media itself, social media has shaped, altered, and recontextualized what sense of place means.





Social media technology platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are perceived as actual places. They have become the new gathering spots. In his prophetic, predictive critic of media in the electronic age, *Media is the Massage*, Marshall McLuhan professes “Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world.¹⁵ The alteration of sense of place by technology through the recontextualization of our visual culture goes behind using iconic and indexical signs, i.e. branding, and into the realm of creating symbolic cultural relationships which alter perceptions of place. But the relationship is consensual, learned over time through usage. As Skaggs explains in *Fire Signs*, symbols, as “culturally agreed-upon connections between the sign and its referent... (require) a learning process in order for the audience to be made aware of the sign/referent connection since it is based solely on convention.”¹⁶

This process of the way symbols come to represent culture, place, or identity is not an inherently negative, it is just the power and ontology of all symbolic signs and communication. It is what makes the symbol incredible, magical and fascinating. As Skaggs explains, a sign can be iconic, indexical, and symbolic all at the same time. However when it rises to the level of being symbolic, the interpretation has the capacity to achieve deeper and more complex meaning, which is a lot of power. It achieves this level of influence for various psychological reasons. It engages the receiver as a more active participant within the communication/language process. However, with this great power symbolic language has on cultural relations, one has to ask, what if any responsibility is there with its usage?

Social media platforms use symbolic communication and visual culture on an even more complex level. Receivers of their messaging are simultaneous creators and senders of messaging. This platform instills the audience (the consumer) with a sense of purpose and responsibility for delivering and spreading the messages for within system in which the main purpose and function is to make the platform. Messages crisscross with one another over cyberspace pulling threads of influence over culture, visual culture, visual literacy—redefining the meanings of sense of self, sense of community and sense of place. These messages are culturally agreed upon through a consensual learning (or self-indoctrination) process, based on convention, with the receiver has an active participant. For their reward, participants get the moniker of ‘influencer’ over others to incorporate as part of his/her sense of identity by adding members of their ‘cyber community’ to enlist as their followers, another descriptor to attach to self-identity.

Beller puts the connection between content, method, and medium into historical context. “This moment, which may be identified with what has been called from various corners and with differing emphasis as post-structuralism, the information age, media society, postindustrial society, postmodernism, post-colonialism, and/or globalization, is marked above all else by a new degree of saturation of social space by visual technologies, and, one must assume, a related shift in their social function and significance.”



As noted, culture always and necessarily has had a visual component. However, the shift in emphasis toward an increasing importance of the visible (and its manipulation) is due principally to two related factors: the organization of economies and societies with and by images and the related hyper-development and intensification of visual technologies.”¹⁷ This saturation and technologies he speaks about are significant considerations in rethinking design in connection with sense of place, and using this heightened focus on visuality in conjunction with new technologies and mediums. As designers, we have to consider the effects of the mediums themselves, how societies absorb images, and overall nature of where culture meets visual culture in our times. As Beller says, “visuality is constructed via the interweaving of the discourses that would capture vision and the technologies that utilize it.”¹⁸

The challenges and transitions of the medium being as much a part of our visual culture as the content are prophetically argued decades ago by Marshall McLuhan in his iconic *Medium is the Massage*. “We have already reached a point where remedial control, born out of knowledge of media and their total effects on all of us, must be exerted. How shall the new environment be programmed now that we have become so involved with each other, now that all of us have become the unwitting work force for social change?”

The whirlpool of information fathered by electric media far surpasses any possible influence mom and dad can now bring to bear. Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of “time” and “space” and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men. Too many people know too much about each other. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.”¹⁹

Even back then, McLuhan was pointing out media was beginning to work as an environment in and of itself—a place that disrupts our conventional human comprehension of space and time. McLuhan argues that societies have always been more shaped by the nature of the media by which they communicate, rather than by the content. McLuhan’s point about modern visual and electronic media is precisely how visual media, social media platforms, and industry can take full advantage of influencing visual culture and the semiotics of place. To a certain extent, their success at doing so proves McLuhan’s argument.²⁰ The system uses a powerfully influential form of media that is not just visual, but aural and experiential, and through creating semiotic moments, shapes its own culture and visual language system, forming an alternate and artificial sense of place. Social media and advertising are just two examples of the how influential the use of symbolism and visuality is for not only shaping visual culture, but all aspects of culture.



Time, Space and Experience

Culture is visual and material, but lives and breaths through ideation and experiences in a space-time continuum. In his book *Standing by Words*, Wendell Berry talks about the key ingredient to a culture is being kept alive through shared acts, experiences, remembrance, values, and ways of life. “A community in place is built on remembered things, events, people, and actions that have taken place over the course of history. In its cultural aspect, the community is an order of memories preserved consciously in instructions, songs, and stories, and both consciously and unconsciously in ways. A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge in place for a long time. That is, the essential wisdom accumulates in the community much as fertility builds in the soil. In both, death becomes potentiality.”²¹

History, heritage, visuality, and environment become the cause and effect to people interacting with each other in place over space-time—behaviors, values, actions and experiences foster culture, and then culture in turn informs them. If there is no continuation from the past to the future through the present, the present is detached. Culture then influences sense of place through the experiences, communications, interactions, and all the conscious and unconscious ways that ‘essential wisdom and knowledge’ is lived out in time and space. Without the space-time component, there is no culture or sense of place. A sense of temporality adds the necessary depth and meaning to culture to make it culture. Yet time isn’t the only ingredient, as we’ve covered. It is also based on direct experience. There are modern era conditions that interrupt that process and over time, also interfered with cultures’ ability to connect with nature, and with people’s opportunity to form a connection between their identity with nature and culture of their own place.

Colonialism's Lasting Impact

I have always been a student of history and genealogy, especially with regard to my places, Nebraska and Louisiana. As part of this exploration, I specifically wanted to deepen my knowledge of my own heritage as it followed the historical timeline of colonialism. This allowed me to fill in gaps in timeline of my genealogy and deepen my contextual understanding of my heritage as it relates to the natural surroundings and culture of my place. It also provided me with a deeper awareness of colonialism’s lasting impact to my place. I believe studying colonialism’s impact, both positive and negative, is crucial to understanding the roots of modern global, societal, and environmental processes. Colonialism led to many economic, political, cultural, intellectual, and social advancements. Colonialism is also at the heart of degradation of natural resources, hyper-capitalism, urbanization, destruction of natural landscapes, the extinction of species, and the repression and homogenization of cultures. Repression, displacement, enslavement,





"Sculptures or objects have the power to create a sense of place by their own physical presence. A piece of sculpture appears to incarnate personhood and be the center of its own world. The human being can command a world because he has feelings and intentions. The art object may seem to do so because its form is symbolic of human feeling."

—Yi-Fu Tuan



and slaughter of other human beings is Colonialism's biggest sin. I feel connected to my heritage in a positive way. This does not negate my deep remorse and revulsion for what colonialism did to the Indigenous Peoples of this place, or to the African people who were kidnapped and brought to this place against their will, or respect for what their descendants are still going through today. In fact, it deepens my understanding and reverence. It has been enlightening to explore my own heritage while at the same time learn more about history of my place, and how colonialism has played a role. There is deep history of how colonialism has impacted the people of my place both past and present. Leading up to New Orleans' 300-year anniversary as a city in 2018, I saw it as an opportunity to return to my family genealogy research.

While I have always been immersed in New Orleans history, having even been a volunteer at the New Orleans Historical Collection Museum for awhile, I wanted to deepen the context of my knowledge and awareness with regard to colonialism's lasting impacts on people and culture in my own place. No humans living today in the Western world, especially the United States, is far removed from colonialism's lasting impacts. Exploring the history of one's own place and one's own heritage along with studying how history impacted other people's heritage is crucial for better understanding and appreciating the context of history and how it has impacted different people and cultures differently. This is essential perspective and awareness to have in rethinking design as a way to bridge humans, culture and nature as a way to support sense of place.

The Global, Mobile, Industrial Village

How do humans maintain place identity and meaning, or any relationship to place and placeness, within this 'global and mobile' village? How does culture maintain roots in the natural world and physical reality when our modern lives are defined by an global industrial framework of consumerism, and our daily lives have quite literally begun to revolve around a virtually remote community? Adding to the challenge, it is more common than not for humans to leave the place they were born and raised to live in one or often many more places throughout their lifetime, what role does local culture have in our lives?

As Yi-Fu Tuan remarks in his book *Space and Place*, "Modern man is so mobile that he has not the time to establish roots; his experience and appreciation of place is superficial. This is the conventional wisdom. Abstract knowledge about a place can be acquired in short order if one is diligent. The visual quality of an environment is quickly tallied if one has the artist's eye. But the 'feel' of a place takes longer to acquire. It is made of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique of sights, sounds, smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunrise and sunset, or work and play. The feel of place is registered in one's muscles and bones."²²



The idea of adopting ways of living in and being within a construct of local placeness inherently creates friction with the realities of the globalized system in which we currently live. Humans can travel the globe within hours, order products from around the world, have them delivered to their door within days, and interact with others in a globally without leaving their office chair. We can't go back and erase the last 260 years of industrial, mechanical, and technological advancements that propelled us to this reality, we just have to make it fit better within a more holistic system. As Harold Proshansky argues, "without minimizing the significance of stability and constancy, we must stress the importance of an ecological approach in which the person is seen as involved in transactions with a changing world."²³

Living in a global and mobile world is a misfit in many respects to rethinking design as a framework for re-cultivating place stewardship, place meaning and identity, and building a bridge between humans, culture and nature. However understanding and respecting the role and influence globalization and mobility as a part of human lives is also a requirement. It doesn't have to be, cannot be, a binary choice. The only possibility is to work on the places where the misfits are occurring, and find synthesis.

Homogenization

Homogenization is one of contextual demands the modern world makes on cultivating placeness and sense of place. According to Webster's Dictionary cultural homogenization refers to the reduction in cultural diversity through the popularization and diffusion of a wide array of cultural symbols—not only physical objects, but customs, ideas, and values.²⁴ David O'Connor, an economist who studies and writes about globalization, defines homogenization as "the process by which local cultures are transformed or absorbed by a dominant outside culture." Cultural homogenization has been called "perhaps the most widely discussed hallmark of global culture." Taken to the scientific theoretical end, homogenization could result in the breakdown of all cultural barriers and the global assimilation of a single culture.²⁵

Homogenization's cousin is gentrification. There are many definitions and explanations for what gentrification is. Webster's Dictionary defines gentrification as "a process in which a poor area (as of a city) experiences an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate and rebuild homes and businesses and which often results in an increase in property values and the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents."²⁶

However, gentrification is more than that. It is what happened to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. It is what is happening in my own neighborhood right now. Along with the tearing down and replacing with new structures, it the accompanying replacing of authentic local character, personality, aesthetic style, and visuality of a community's culture built over decades and decades of time that is replaced with a



non-authentic visuality, aesthetics, and materiality. These replacing cultural elements have no roots built from sense of place to them. Often times this rapid influx of new residents is brought about by the opportunity to buy into a neighborhood with low monetary investment, then drive up the monetary value for profit. This is a self-conscious approach to building, as Alexander puts it in *Synthesis of Form*, which often results in the exploitation or elimination of the neighborhood's original authentic unselfconscious culture.²⁷ Gentrification is about more than architecture and real estate values. It is often accompanied by an onslaught of national chain businesses that move in and replace local business owners. Culture homogenization sets in and eliminates diversity, uniqueness, and autonomy which threatens the entire culture of a community.

It could be argued that globalization helps communities become interconnected socially and economically, and therefore makes them more resilient. When a small community of businesses can sell its products around the world, they are less vulnerable to economic downturns locally. Homogenization, on the other hand, doesn't seem to have any discernible benefits to improving local culture or sense of place because it is destructive to the many ways people form place identity. It dilutes place stewardship, and eliminates place meaning and attachment.

In his book *Globalizations and the Ancient World*, Justin Jennings writes "homogenization goes beyond the widespread dissemination of foreign objects or people. Instead, cultural homogenization entails a diffusion of a way of being."²⁸ He goes on to quote from *The Anthropology of Globalization* edited by Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo, which describes ways of being as "musical forms, architecture, and modes of dress to eating habits, languages, philosophical ideas, and cultural values and dispositions."²⁹ The diffusion of ways of being that Jennings, Inda, Rosaldo discuss are the ingredients that create the semiotic language and culture of a place. Much in the way that social media and advertising disrupts visual culture, homogenization also disrupts entire ways of being, including the unique semiotic language of a place.

The Problem with 'Think Global, Act Local'

The Resilience Alliance's paper discusses whether sense of place could be 'scaled up' from local to global. "Sense of place literature is dominated by research occurring at relatively small scales (*Lewicka 2011*) and, as a consequence, proximity, direct experiences, and the length of exposure to the same physical space are factors that are often correlated with a strong sense of place. However, how do sense of place and sustainable behavior 'scale up'? Can attachment to a local place promote stewardship at a more general level, in a kind of 'rooted cosmopolitanism' (*Chapin and Knapp 2015*)? It has been suggested that 'care may be a way to engage people in planetary stewardship by connecting their responses to what they notice in everyday life with their effect on larger environmental systems' (*Nassauer 2011:321*).





When a personal experience of the whole biosphere is inaccessible, mediated experiences of the global ecological system may have a crucial role in defining a sense of the biosphere. The panarchy model in resilience thinking (*Gunderson and Holling 2002*) could provide a source of hypotheses about cross-scale dynamics of sense of place, which could be integrated with, e.g., studies of how attachment to neighborhood, state, country, and the globe are correlated with environmental attitudes (*Devine-Wright et al. 2015*).”³⁰

Different variations of this ‘think global, act local’ model have been around for decades. It is not working. Nor will it ever work. Human experiences, perceptions, identity, place stewardship, and a feeling of connection to natural world are not created globally. Credible research and models have proven that two of the most powerful influences on humans are immediacy and proximity when it comes to increasing motivation, creating awareness, and changing behavior. Global thinking doesn't provide either of those conditions. Most importantly, sense of place is a localized phenomena. This doesn't mean I don't have a feel a sense of the city of Paris' character, or the place character of the French countryside. I do feel a sense of connection to these places, even though I still have never set foot in them, and these feelings resonate deep within me for various reasons: the art, literature, food, the nature, architecture, and my own family heritage. People can have a sense of connection for places they have never personally experienced, but not a sense of place. Not according to sense of place theory. Sense of place emerges from human interactions with the biophysical environment. It is an emergent property of a social-biophysical interaction. The elements that create sense of place occur locally Not globally. There is no such thing as a global village.

Think Local, Act Local

Sense of place is a local ecosystem. It is based and reliant upon local patterns, relationships, and structures. This is an opportunity to rethink design. The reasons why are hopefully self-evident in the exploration of this thesis. This means rethinking design within the conceptualization of being in support of a local ecology—solving for patterns of interactions and relationships of a local ecosystem.

In the documentary video *A Sense of Place*, Kirkpatrick Sale crystallizes some of the ways human beings will have to think about ‘solving for pattern’ when it comes to the challenges with returning to value localness. He states there must be a commitment of bioregionalism, returning to living in a bioregional symbiosis between city and land. This goes beyond just shopping at a local farmers market. Ecologist John Todd, also interviewed in the video, mentions the idea of ‘carrying capacity,’ in which he describes as living our lives intentionally and consciously, to not tip the capacity limitations of our own area, and to not damage other species, the land, resources, or each other. Sale says that salvation lies in the community committing to bioregional thinking and action.³¹ In other words, ‘think local, act local’ is the new mantra. and the physical surroundings of our own places.



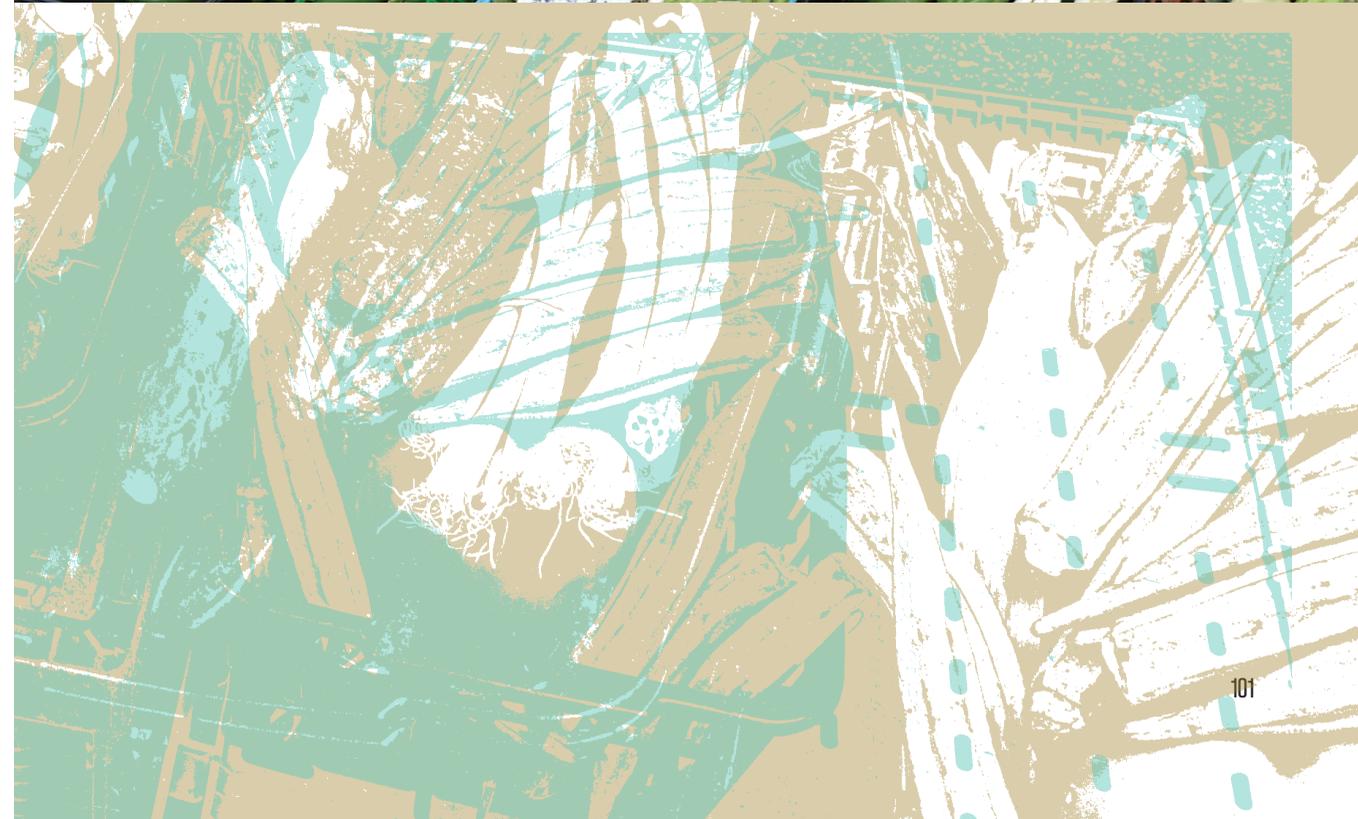
Agriculture: A Bridge Between Humans, Culture, and Nature

Human culture was once congruous with agriculture. Agriculture propelled human civilization as we know it today. Before agriculture, humans were wandering, nomadic hunters and gatherers until approximately 12,000 years ago, early humans figured out how to cultivate soil and grow food. They eventually began raising livestock. Irrigation, ways of improving seeds and plants, and better tools came about over the centuries, and a new way of living was formed. After about 11,700 or so years of living that way, a dramatic change happened in the lives of humans—the advent of machinery. The Industrial Revolution created a profound paradigm shift in the relationship between human beings and the natural environment that changed the fundamental human experience in almost every way: human to human interaction, how humans use their bodies, daily acts of living, skills, architecture, aesthetics, politics, art, and visual culture just to name a few.

Everything changed. Understanding the cultural differences between the eras before and after machines, and how fast the shift happened, provides crucial perspective. Even though the mid-1700s to mid-1800s seems like a long time ago to humans living today, it is not that long of time period compared to the way humans lived before that for millions of years. Miles Orvell's book *After the Machines: Visual Arts and the Erasing of Cultural Boundaries* provides insight into how culture, specifically visual arts and visual culture, was impacted by the advent of machinery into society.

In Orvell's essays, he critiques modern day culture "theme park" atmosphere of visibility. His narratives find focus on the evolution of the camera in society, including how documentary photographers of the early and mid-20th Century, like Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston found a way to use machines, in this case modern cameras, as artistic tools in way that turned the era of the machines on its head. "The camera, in the hands of the modern artist, was functioning as an instrument for reforming perceptions, a way of relating the new vision to technology and art." ³² This era has similarities to our own in terms of navigating new technologies for our own purposes, and rethinking how design uses the technologies to shape perceptions today.

Industrial and post-industrial eras have brought enumerable advancements to the daily acts of living, improving life for millions, and providing benefits too numerous to list. Humans have a very easy life compared to preindustrial ancestors. However, because the advancements impacted so many ways of life and came so quickly, society didn't have a lot of time to contemplate the systematic demands (i.e. problems) these solutions might also create. For instance, as Wendell Berry explains in his book *The Unsettling of America*, the importance of understanding the industrial revolution in the context land and soil. "If we are to understand the history of our landscapes, which mostly are economic—farms, ranches, working forests, mines—we will have to begin by understanding the impetus and motive of the Industrial Revolution. I believe that this contest between industrialism



and agrarianism now defines the most fundamental human difference, for it divides not just two nearly opposite concepts of agriculture and land use, but also two nearly opposite ways of understanding ourselves, our fellow creatures, and our world.”³³

The cultural symbol for industrialism is the machine. For the digital technology age it is the computer. According to Berry, the cultural symbols for agrarianism “begin with givens: land, plants, animals, weather, hunger, and the birthright knowledge of agriculture. Industrialists are always ready to ignore, sell, or destroy the past to gain the entirely unprecedented wealth, comfort, and happiness supposedly to be found in the future. Agrarian farmers know that their very identity depends on their willingness to receive gratefully, use responsibly, and hand down intact an inheritance, both natural and cultural, from the past. Agrarians understand themselves as the users and caretakers of some things they did not make, and of some things that they cannot make.

Berry doesn’t mince words when it comes to his opinion of the industrialist agenda, but he makes valid points to think about in context of rethinking design's influence on culture which also affects our relationship with nature. The goal of solutions, as Christopher Alexander says, is that they should begin by meeting requirements and decomposing the misfits of the problem. Wendell Berry offers that they should minimize the creation of other problems, and fit within the carrying capacity of their surroundings. Arturo Escobar and Fritjof Capra provide the worldview that design solutions should be ontological, holistic, and in synthesis with bridging culture and nature together.

To facilitate sense of place by building a bridge between humans, nature and culture, design must meet their requirements and the through the patterns of interactions and relationships between them. There are roughly 2.2 million apps available on Apple’s iPhone operating system. Human beings didn’t know they had so many problems that could be solved with an app until so many apps were created to solve them. How did we ever function as a society and culture without these 2.2 million apps? As of August 2020, there are 7.8 billion people on planet Earth, of which, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, only two billion of those 7.8 billion make their livelihood from agriculture. Only 25 percent of the world’s people who interact with earth to create food. The world has agribusiness conglomerates instead of agricultural communities. Even though the number of home farms who grow their own food has been increasing. Agriculture groups have warned, it is not nearly enough.

By 2050, there will be over 9 billion people on the planet, and the land area that is suitable for growing food is decreasing because of climate change, and other environmental factors such as droughts, monoculture practices, deforestation, and declining pollinator populations. At the same time, humans encroachment further into wild places and interaction with wild animal populations is exposing humans to new diseases. Is there an app for this? That is not to say that technology and machines shouldn't be included and used in our daily lives or in design. It just points to the need for



consciousness, awareness, and focusing on the actual problem's requirements, not starting with capabilities first and working backwards to best fit the problem to the solution, but best fit the solution to the problem.

As Berry points out, humans may want to finally, carefully and thoughtfully consider that our “very identity”, and ability to live resiliently, sustainability, and reciprocally within our ecosystem “depends on their willingness to receive gratefully, use responsibly, and hand down intact an inheritance, both natural and cultural. The Agrarians understand themselves as the users and caretakers of some things they did not make, and of some things that they cannot make,” according to Berry.³⁴

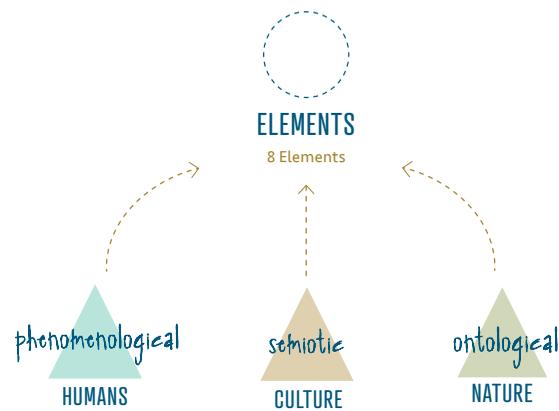
Obviously, humans can not and would not want to go back to an age without many if not all of our modern advancements. However, by accepting and incorporating some of the wisdom of our instinctual relationship with the natural world along with the practices and values and problem-solving approach of the Agrarian age could swing the pendulum of culture and nature more into balance. Taking the counsel of something totally diametrically opposed to most modern ways of life, like agrarian values, is a jolt that ignites a spark for rethinking problems, rethinking responses, rethinking design.

Why is agriculture such an important example of humanity and culture’s relationship with nature? Quite simply, because all human beings needs to eat. As Berry shares, the agriculture crisis is a crisis of culture and of identity. We are losing touch with the physical and metaphysical understanding of the physical world—the source of our ‘bodily life’. We no longer know the earth we come from, so we have lost respect and reverence for what it gives to us, and we hold no cultural (or personal) responsibility for it. Culture is dominated for most by consumption not production.

“It is impossible to divorce the question of what we do from the question of where we are—or rather, where we think we are. That no sane creature befools its own nest, is accepted as generally true. What we conceive to be our nest, and where we think it is, are therefore questions of the greatest importance. Do we for instance carry on our work in our nest, or do we only reside and get our mail there? Is our nest a place of consumption only or is it also a place of production? Is it the source of necessary goods, energies, and “services”, or only their destination?”³⁵

Berry's criticisms of the meaning of home in the modern world have even more context now that so many people are at home more than ever because of COVID-19. Maybe this experience has brought us back home not just physically but phenomenologically too. There is no more fundamental starting point for connecting to place than one's own home. Perhaps home is a portal to rethinking design in support of sense of place. Likewise, there is no more fundamental path to bridging the relationship between humans, culture and nature than being involved with growing local food. Agriculture connects people to nature, and in doing so, creates a local culture.





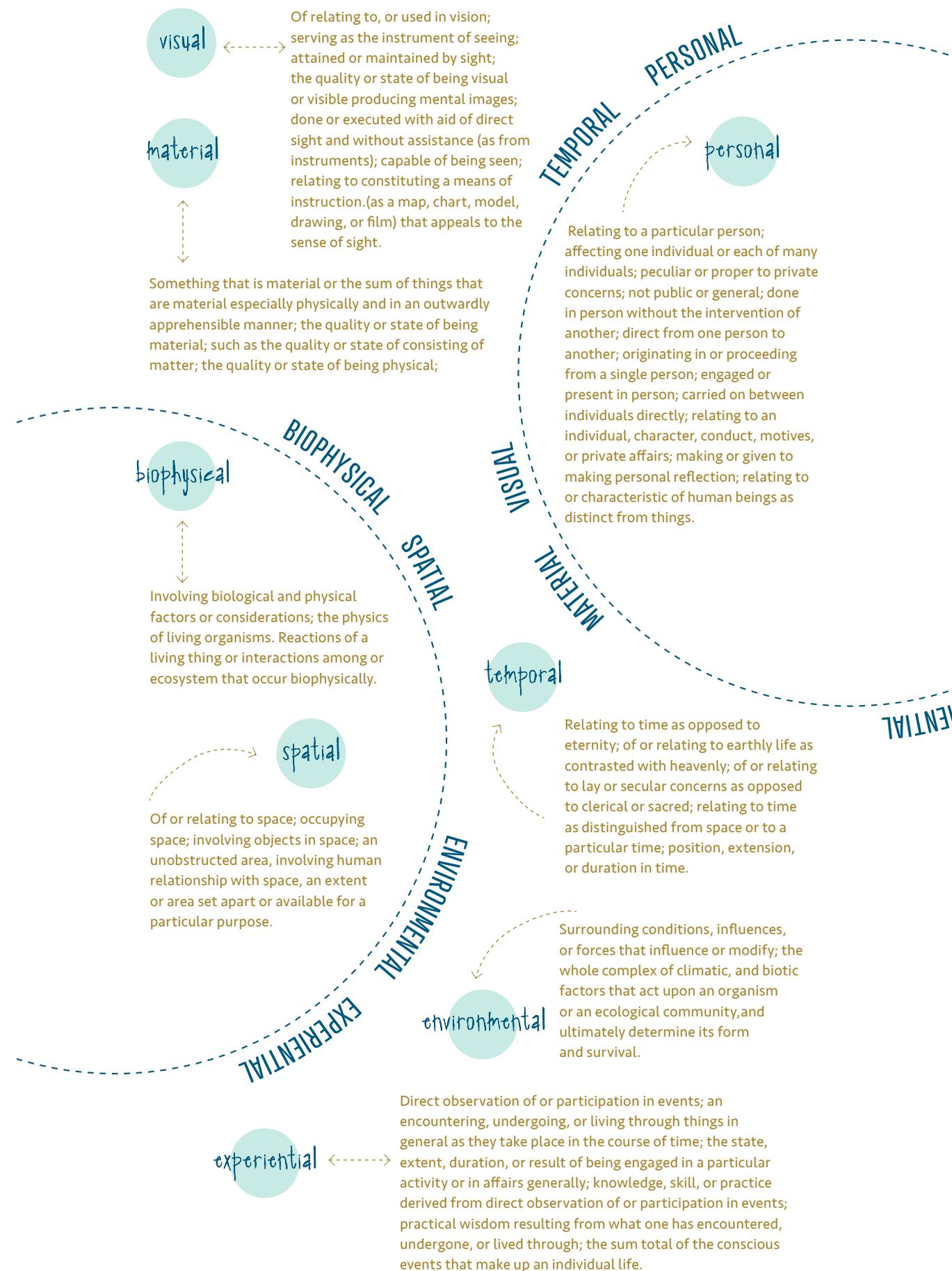
Building a Framework

Christopher Alexander writes in *Notes on Synthesis of Form* that a solution is in the form we decide to shape as a part of the world over which we have control. The rest of the world, the part we cannot control, or should not attempt to control, we should leave alone. Anything in the world that makes demands on form is the context of the problem. Fitness is a relation of mutual acceptability between these two. Our goal then, he writes, should be to satisfy the mutual demands which the two make on one another. We want to reduce the misfits, as he calls them, and increase the fitness. “We want to put the context and the form into effortless contact or frictionless coexistence.”³⁶

The part of the world having to do with sense of place that we can control (and can decide to shape) are its characteristics, its elements, and influences that relate to humans, culture, nature. They are the ingredients to creating place identity, place meaning which in turn creates stronger sense of place by bridging humans, culture, and nature together from a view of holism and localism. The contexts that put demands on that form are the lasting impacts of industrialism and colonialism including globalization, hyper-mobility, gentrification, perfectionism, hyper-capitalism, destruction of natural environment, and homogenization. They detract and disrupt the form of sense of place from taking shape, and living the best life humans are capable of living in their physical surroundings. We can't control those demands outright. No single design solution is going to eliminate cultural homogenization. There is so much the industrialized world and technology has provided us, we wouldn't want to give it up. What we can do is approach this system of demands placed on sense of place with a systematic framework for supporting it. Putting the two ways of being more in balance in co-existence with the other.

A sense of place design ecology is not a framework of control on the contextual demands necessarily. That would be impossible. Instead, it focuses on creating better fitness for building a bridge between humans, culture, and nature with the expectations of a quality of life and ways of being that includes the parts that create sense of place, and the reduction of any misfits detracting from it. Can there be frictionless coexistence between localism and globalism? Between homogenization and local diversity? It remains to be seen. What can be achieved through a foundational theory, methodology, and framework is a way of systematically rethinking design through the ecology's pathways of where it can bridge humans, culture and nature together. Having more understanding of the characteristics and influences of each of these has provided a way to represent them as elements of sense of sense of place within the ecology's theory and framework.

Elements Sense of Place Design Ecology





The Community of Isle de Jean Charles

The people of Isle de Jean Charles have the ill-fated distinction of being the first community in the United States that must leave their place because of climate change. They have to leave their coastal bayou region of Southeast Louisiana because the waters of the Gulf of Mexico are swallowing up their land. To be very clear however, rising seas due to macro climate change on a macro level is not the only cause. There is the added, and according to scientists, the even more acute cause of southeast Louisiana having been carved up into slices by the oil and gas industry. To make area navigable, they created a massive water interstate system of canals. They are like veins, draining the soil from the land into the sea. Add to that the system of channeling the Mississippi to deny it the ability to flood when needed, and the land is starved of its lifeblood, new sediment to replenish itself. It is a recipe for the disastrous reality, and the people of this region are now in the grips of it.

The State of Louisiana has embarked on an unprecedented, one-of-a-kind project to resettle the people of Isle de Jean Charles. Their own brief synopsis explains:

The residents of Isle de Jean Charles are a population of predominantly American Indian ancestry who live in a place that is rapidly disappearing into the Gulf of Mexico. Once encompassing more than 22,000 acres, only 320 acres of Isle de Jean Charles remain.

The sole connecting road to the mainland—Island Road, built in 1953—is often impassable due to high winds, tides, sea level rise or storm surge. This effectively blocks residents from school, work and essential goods and services. The land where island residents and their families once hunted, trapped, grazed animals and farmed is now open water. Unfortunately, the challenges of restoring or preserving the island's landmass are insurmountable.⁹

So the question arises: How does the state help an entire community resettle to a new home in a new place that offers a prosperous and sustainable future while also preserving their culture and values that are so tied to a particular place? In response to that question, a dedicated team of state and local officials, planners, engineers, architects and policymakers is collaborating with current and past island residents to implement a program for the Resettlement of Isle de Jean Charles.

Even with this focused effort, the resettlement has emerged as a complex process, involving a wide range of cultural, social, environmental, economic, institutional and political factors. As with any inclusive effort, all stakeholders bring unique values and perspectives to the table, which often complicates consensus-based decision-making. Therefore, the Resettlement cannot be driven solely by economic and operational objectives, but must incorporate a comprehensive, holistic and open-ended approach.

It is worth pausing for a moment to process what they are describing—moving an entire community of people and rebuilding a whole new town, structures and all. Part of the sense of place design ecology is to seek out knowledge about a place's Indigenous populations. The heritage of the people of Isle de Jean Charles encapsulates the connection between place, people, history, heritage, nature, and culture. Most of the residents have Biloxi, Chitimacha, and Choctaw ancestry, tribes upon which one of the most horrific events in our nation's history was perpetrated.

In the 1830s, Andrew Jackson enacted the inhumanly-titled Indian Removal Act, also called The Trail of Tears, which forced tribes and nations of Indigenous Peoples to migrate west of the Mississippi. As they were crossing the mainland of Louisiana, some escaped and/or fled and hid in the area we know as Terrebonne Parish. Around this time, a French man named Jean Marie Naquin married an native woman, Pauline Verdin, (a name given to her by the French). This was very common at the time as the French had trading and even social relationships with the Indigenous peoples of the area. The couple move to a strip of land off the Louisiana coast. The area is eventually named for Naquin's father, Jean Charles. All of their children except for one married into other Indigenous families around the area, which formed this new group of interwoven native tribal people with French as their primary language, and a new culture of their own, very much tied directly to the water and their natural surroundings.¹⁰

At the community's peak, 300 families called Isle de Jean Charles home, but only about 30 remain. Erosion fueled by a mix of climate change and land subsidence, accelerated by the fossil fuel industry is forcing them out once more. According to the project's web site, The Resettlement Project has purchased 515 acres of rural land near Schriever in Terrebonne Parish to serve as the site for the resettlement community.

The selected site, about 40 miles north of Isle de Jean Charles, is on higher ground more inland. The project's mission statement is an acknowledgment that the resettlement cannot be driven solely by economic means, but must be a holistic, comprehensive approach that takes into account how culture interacts with land and natural surroundings. If the state and the elders of the tribes can actually pull it off, it will be a great model for future projects like this on how this kind of thinking can inform solutions for moving communities due to climate change.

Unfortunately, there are already problems with construction of the community, and reluctance from members of the community to leave their ancestral land, even though the land will be completely under water likely within a generation. One example of this strong place attachment, from the Resettlement Project's own research, speaks volumes about the importance of paying attention to the complexity of the human, culture and nature relationship with regard to place and sense of place.

"In interviews with the Resettlement team, island residents revealed they see Isle de Jean Charles as a place of security and isolation. They embrace the rural setting—the quiet and the tranquility. It is a place where they know each other and their history, and a place where both independence and care for neighbors and family are core values. Despite its challenges, residents know how to live on the island. They are resilient and ingenious "do-it-yourself" individuals who can repair their houses and fix their cars, heaters and pipes. They know how to prepare for storms and how to recover afterward. Some of these skills are transferable to The New Isle, but others will be lost."¹¹



An rendering of the newly conceived resettlement of Isle de Jean Charles in its new location farther inland in Terrebonne Parish. Once encompassing more than 22,000 acres, only 320 acres of the original Isle de Jean Charles remain. The sole connecting road to the mainland—Island Road, built in 1953—is often impassable due to high winds, tides, sea level rise or storm surge. This effectively blocks residents from school, work and essential goods and services. In January 2016, the U.S. federal government awarded the state of Louisiana \$48.3 million for the Isle de Jean Charles Resettlement Project, as part of a winning application to the National Disaster Resilience Competition. With this funding, Louisiana is developing and attempting to implement a structured and voluntary retreat from Isle de Jean Charles 'that is thoughtful and equitable, while maximizing opportunities for current and past island residents.' One of their biggest challenges at this time is convincing the residents to actually leave and relocate. Source: <http://isledejeancharles.la.gov>.

As one islander said, "I have never fished in fresh water; I have only fished in salt water." He went on to describe how he views the difference and the magnitude of change it requires. This is just one of the many changes islanders are facing. Although the proposed move is only 40 miles north, in many ways, it is perceived as a world away." In describing his fishing this way, this resident reminds us of how connected his way of living and being is to the specific characteristics and ecosystem of his place."¹²

The know the land beneath them is slipping further and further into the Gulf of Mexico. It's not a matter of stopping that from happening. They are afraid of losing their way of life and their identity. It's hard to blame them. They are free people living their culture and heritage on land that means something to them. While the Resettlement Project has worked in earnest and with good intention to make a place for them. It is precisely that this place that is created for them that is the problem. This new place has a self-consciousness to it, as Christopher Alexander calls it.

The new place doesn't have the organic, authentic unselfconscious feel of evolving through a temporal, cultural process mediated by relationship with natural environmental surroundings. There is a lot planning that went into building this new place with a lot of attention to and intention towards the culture and ways of being, but how do you include sense of place in a blueprint? What does this kind of move do to the semiotics of place and the visual culture that is part of their individual and cultural identity? How does it affect perceptions of nature and how they interact with nature? These are answers the people of Isle de Jean Charles will be finding out for themselves.



The Water Hyacinth Effect

In the early 1960s, prominent mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz researched and published a scientific theory that posed as a question to his peers at a scientific conference 1972: “Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?” The purpose of his provocative question, he said, was “to illustrate the idea that some complex dynamical systems exhibit unpredictable behaviors such that small variances in the initial conditions could have profound and widely divergent effects on the system’s outcomes. Because of the sensitivity of these systems, outcomes are unpredictable. This idea became the basis for a branch of mathematics known as *chaos theory*, which has been applied in countless scenarios since its introduction. Lorenz discovered that this deterministic interpretation of the universe could not account for the imprecision in human measurement of physical phenomena. He observed that nature’s interdependent cause-and-effect relationships are too complex to resolve.”⁵ Lorenz’s theory was considered groundbreaking, dispelling the idea that we could predict the universe and its natural systems. Around this same time Lorenz was making his theory known to the world, the common water hyacinth (*pontederia crassipes*) was choking the life out of the ecosystem in the bayous of south Louisiana. The water hyacinth is a plant brought to Louisiana from South America in the 19th century by wealthy, aristocratic

Europeans because they liked the way it floated on the water, and the purple flowers were pretty. Because of its invasive growing habit and the fact that it is not of this ecosystem, millions of dollars have been spent eradicating the plant so it doesn’t choke navigable waterways and suck all the oxygen out of the water killing everything else that lives there. Around the early to mid-20th century the state of Louisiana began using DDT like other places in the U.S. A highly toxic (and carcinogenic) material, it kills any organic material with which it comes to contact. It also causes genetic and cell mutations in animals (and humans). The use of DDT has been one of the causes of the Brown Pelican, American Bald Eagle and other birds to nearly become extinct.

American Bald Eagles’ historically reported to be seen in large numbers, with their 6-foot diameter nests at the tops of the cypress trees, until DDT contributed to their decline. After DDT was outlawed as a pesticide, the eagles began coming back to South Louisiana, but due to habitat loss, there will never be at the numbers they were, which subsequently influences the rodent and snake population. While DDT is illegal, locals in many bayou regions believe it is still secretly being used. Other substances just as or nearly as damaging are also being used to eradicate the hyacinth and kill off vegetation back away from roadways and waterways.

Biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson sounded the alarm for the nation about DDT in her groundbreaking and culture-changing book, *Silent Spring*, which led to an environmental movement, and eventually the Environmental Protection Agency, Clean Air and Water Acts.⁶

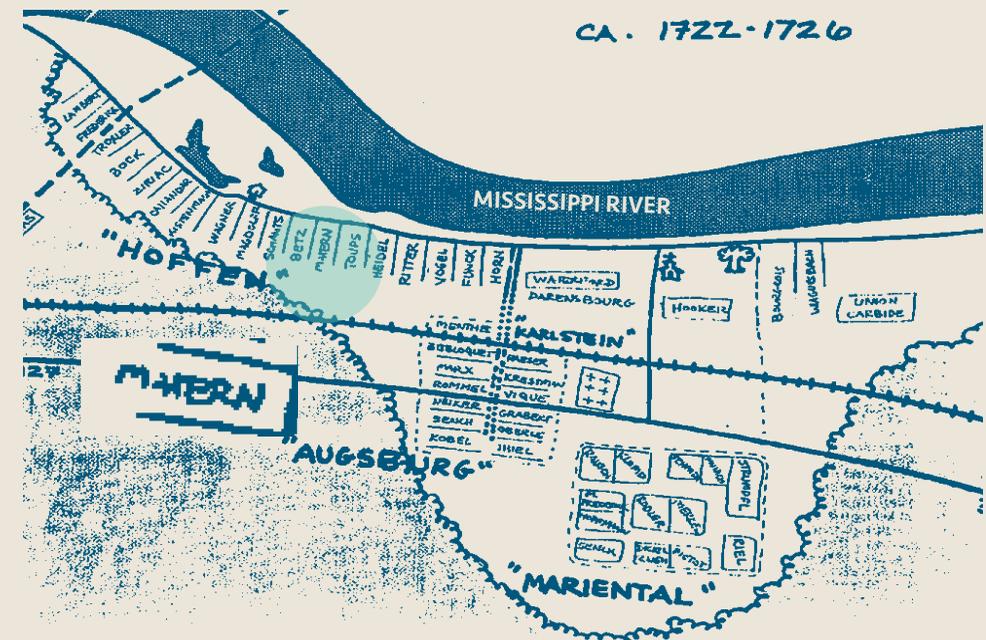
A newcomer, the Chinese Tallow tree, is one of the latest threats to Louisiana native flora and fauna. Kudzu is another—a plant native to Japan and southeast China—introduced to North America back in the 19th century. It is so ubiquitous and invasive today, it has been nicknamed the “vine that ate the south.” Thousands of square miles have been blanketed by this aggressive plant.

As for the water hyacinth, after multiple decades, it has inserted itself into Louisiana’s watery ecosystem. It is only a matter of how much it can be mitigated. It will never be eradicated completely. It will continue to cause headaches and frustration for those who use the waterways to make a living and everyone else. Ironically, some tourism brochures and websites actually use the image of water hyacinths floating on bayous as a symbol of this place. Sometimes with the tagline ‘beauty of the natural surroundings’ as a selling point. There are some scientists who say that the average person gets Lorenz’s butterfly theory completely backwards. They point out that what Lorenz was arguing with his theory is “the larger meaning of the butterfly effect is not that we can readily track such connections, but that we can’t. To claim a butterfly’s wings can cause a storm, after all, is to raise the question: How can we definitively say what caused any storm, if it could be something as slight as a butterfly? Lorenz’s work gives us a fresh way to think about cause and effect, but does not offer easy answers.”⁷

Even though Lorenz was aiming his research and theory at weather patterns, we can learn from his work that the natural world (nature) is highly unpredictable and humans cannot and should not attempt to control it, but instead work with it. Lorenz said, “It speaks to our larger expectation that the world should be comprehensible—that everything happens for a reason, and that we can pinpoint all those reasons, however small they may be. Nature itself defies this expectation. It is probability, not certain cause and effect, that now dictates how scientists understand many systems, from subatomic particles to storms. It is probability, not cause and effect, that dictates how scientists understand many systems, from subatomic particles to storms. People grasp that small things can make a big difference,” Emanuel says. “But they make errors about the physical world. People want to attach a specific cause to events, and can’t accept the randomness of the world.”⁸

Lorenz’s work reminds us that our ability to analyze and predict the workings of the world is inherently limited. As human beings we will never be able to predict something as radically unpredictable and complex as the natural world, or the universe that created it. Every time humans attempt to control the natural world, we discount the relationship and realize there is a system already in place. All we have to do is find balance with it.

In 2017, the water hyacinth made its way to Bayou St. John in a big way for whatever reason that year it was worse than it has been in a long time. Bayou St. John is connected to Lake Ponchartrain, and meanders through several neighborhoods in the city. The bayou is used by residents for recreation and fishing. Historically, the bayou was used to bring seafood, vegetables and other goods to market in the city by way of the lake. A group of residents worked together to collect and remove the plant from the bayou, a laborious and exhausting task. *Photo by Scott Threlkeld, Times Picayune-TheAdvocate, and nola.com, June 24, 2017, https://www.nola.com/news/article_fad558b1-b80c-5c82-9927-a1d665bb4651.html.*



From Côte des Allemands to Bayou Blue

A short synopsis of a longer story I wrote about the history of the Côte des Allemands settlement, my own family connection, and the Cajun culture in southeast Louisiana's bayou country.

In 1682, in honor of the French crown, a Colonial Frenchman Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, claimed a crescent-shaped piece of land along a wide river that spilled out into the Gulf of Mexico. At that time there were hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of indigenous peoples living in the southern Mississippi River delta region of the new world.

Beginning in 1699, John Law, a man who worked for the King of France, planned a settlement upriver from New Orleans, modern-day St. Charles and St. John Parishes, in order to feed the people in the port of New Orleans. He convinced a group of people from Alsace-Lorraine, a region along the border of France and Germany, to emigrate and become indentured servants with the promise of paradise and land. They were meant to settle what was at the time wild land in order to sustain the growing port city of New Orleans and its aristocratic residents. Their contracts were for three years during which time they cultivated the land, created farms, and labored as sawyers, carpenters, masons, and blacksmiths on the new small-scale plantations that were beginning to take shape around the region.

By 1718, the crown of France decided to go all in on this new world plan. A man named Jean Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville declared the small port town along the crescent-shaped bend of the river as the official city of La Nouvelle-Orleans, later called Vieux Carré

Original Côte des Allemands settlement. The Joann Matern (or Mathern) plot was in 'Hoffen' section with frontage facing the Mississippi River.



Left to Right: My great, great grandparents Ursin Matherne, and Marguerite Clenda Picou, . Ursin and Clenda are the parents of Lovincy Matherne, my great grandfather, pictured here with one of his many brothers. Clenda lived to be a hundred and one years old, according to some records.

Left to Right: The man on the left is likely Lovincy Matherne, my great grandfather. Lovincy married Elvire Arceneaux, and they had ten children in 15 years. The young boy is probably my grandfather Louis Matherne. He dropped out of school at a very young to work the family farm, as many young boys did in that era. My grandparents Louis Matherne and Mary Ann (Blanchard) Matherne.

(Old Square in English), and now called the French Quarter. By 1721, the new settlement upriver, known as Côte des Allemands (German Coast), was up and running. The settlers were peasants and working class who came over for a new life away from land wars and monarch rule. In 1722, my ancestor, Joann Matern, born in arrived at the Côte des Allemands settlement. Joann Matern's plot of land was in the section called "Hoffen". He was born in 1698 in Rosheim, in the Upper Alsace Region of France. Johann Adam Matern, 26, was listed as a weaver in the 1724 census taken at Côte des Allemands.

France realized quickly that the southern region of this new world would be the bread basket for the entire country, including the northern English colonies, which had much shorter growing season. At the time, the world was economically driven by agriculture—food and products that could be made from the ground (spices, metals, clothing). Strategically located at the mouth of the Mississippi River, the port of New Orleans could secure dominance of the continent, and be a hub for import/export around the world.

As for Johann and Regina, despite incredible hardships, and setbacks, the couple's first year and a half in their new place was productive. According to Germans of Louisiana by Ellen C. Merrill, a hurricane in 1722 nearly wiped out most of the settlement, when it "destroyed crops and drowned colonists."

The weaver from Alsace turned farmer in Louisiana and his wife Regina made it through a hurricane, floods, attacks, and were well on their way to making a successful farm, and growing their family. According to the census in 1724, they had their first of six children. He had cleared first 2 arpents, a quarter of his 8 arpents (6-7 acres) of land (without benefit of ox or horse, and was growing rice, corn and other vegetables. Johann was supporting his wife, new child, and according to the census, his 18 and 20-year-old sisters-in-law. Given that the settlement didn't even have horses or plows, it was remarkable progress. He even had three pigs. To put into context how extraordinary what these settlers were doing, and for historical context, this was before the American

Revolutionary War, and well before the Declaration of Independence was written. New Orleans was the only settlement in the new territory, and it only had a few hundred people living in a about a dozen buildings. New Orleans would not have survived if it would not have been for the people of Côte des Allemands growing food for them. New Orleans itself only had fewer than 800 residents and less than 100 structures in 1724. The settler provided the breadbasket for New Orleans, assuring the survival of the port town and its growth. John Law's Compagnie of the Indes went bankrupt though, and the settlers were released from obligation and given full ownership of their land. By the 1731 census, Johan is still listed as being in the settlement, having three children, and three cows. A little more than 10 years after Johann arrived in the New World, he and his wife Regina got land of their very own. By 1737, the Matern family left their original farm, to once again settle new territory. This time though, they would down river. After three generations, the family lineage can be traced to Lafourche Parish, downriver and southwest of New Orleans, to a new town named after what the French in New Orleans called them, 'the Germans'. The town is was names Des Allemands.

Very early on at the time of the settlement, according to several sources, the Germans picked up the French language, spoken by the French colonists of the region. It's understandable that this relatively small group would need to adjust their language to meet the ruling colony. I wonder though, what bits and pieces of German language and influence were woven into the vernacular and vocabulary of these melding groups. There are several influences still seen by the melding of the Germans with the French over the generations. The Cajun accordion that produces the iconic sound, in fact has its roots from the German accordions. The Cajun style of dancing, referred to as the 'Cajun two-step' also has roots in the traditional polka waltzes of German heritage.

The area they moved to would have been less prone to flooding then the flood plane of the Mississippi River. Lafourche parish has large flat expanses of rich silt and loam

river delta soil. So much so that the neighboring parish is called Terrebonne (good earth). There were also more bayous, waterways, marsh and the bays of the gulf nearby, so there were other ways to make livelihood during off season from farming. They could shrimp, fish and hunt the marshlands. They settled in an area between two small bayous. They built a community they named Bayou blue after one of them. Over time, some moved to Houma, a bigger town just across the intercoastal waterway, in Terrebonne Parish, that was booming because the oil and gas industry had discovered south Louisiana's oil reserves deep in our soil. The Matherne name evolved at some point (I am still looking for when), now with an “e” due to French influence. Over the subsequent generations, they intermarried with other French who were emigrating from France, and with a group of exiled French Canadians (the Acadians) who found refuge in south Louisiana in the mid-1700s, after being kicked out of Nova Scotia by the king of England. My other ancestors are among them (my ancestors on the Blanchard, Arceneaux, and Authement sides. Together these immigrants, my ancestors, combined to create one of the most singularly unique subcultures in America and the world— collectively known as the Cajuns. It is distinguishable by a unique patois (or style) of the French language which is still spoken today, our own unique food, customs, and music. But it also distinguished by a lifestyle, a relationship with the natural world. This culture still has a biophilic and an eco-reliant lifestyle, rooted in a deep connection to natural environment.³⁷

How Houma Got its Name

At first and for awhile, the Native Americans and the French had successful relationships and trade deals. The native peoples showed them how to navigate the swamps, and where the high ground was located during times of flood. They shared hunting and fishing techniques, and other knowledge. The sovereign tribes at that time numbered in double even triple digits, representing thousands upon thousands of people. Today, there are four federally-recognized Louisiana Native American sovereign nation tribes: Chitimacha, Coushatta, Jena Band of Choctaw, and Tunica-Biloxi. The Houma nation, one of the largest, is the namesake of the town of Houma, where my family has lived for generations. The Houma tribe is recognized by state as an official sovereign tribe, but not federally. Others include Adai-Caddo, Biloxi-Chitimacha, Bayou Lafourche Band, Grand Caillou/Dulac Band, Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Ebarb, Isle de Jean Charles Band, Louisiana Choctaw Tribe, and Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe. Ultimately, from the moment La Salle set foot on the crescent shore of the Mississippi, the Indigenous peoples of this place were faced with existential threat. I mention them here to honor them, and recognize this was their land first. As I side note, my partner is one quarter Chitimacha on his mother's side. Her mother, my partner's grandmother, was one hundred percent Chitimacha and raised on the modern-day reservation land southwest of New Orleans. Learning more about their heritage from their personal experiences and perspective, not just from books, has been one of the most valuable outcomes of my exploration in rethinking design as a framework that can engage with cultures and place.



The moment when the consciousness unites with the contents of the unconscious mind, a sense of completeness is reached as a transcendent function of the psyche. The bird is the most fitting symbol of this transcendence, representing a peculiar nature of intuition. Birds have been used in cultural and spiritual rituals involving art, mask-making, and performance going back to the paleolithic period.

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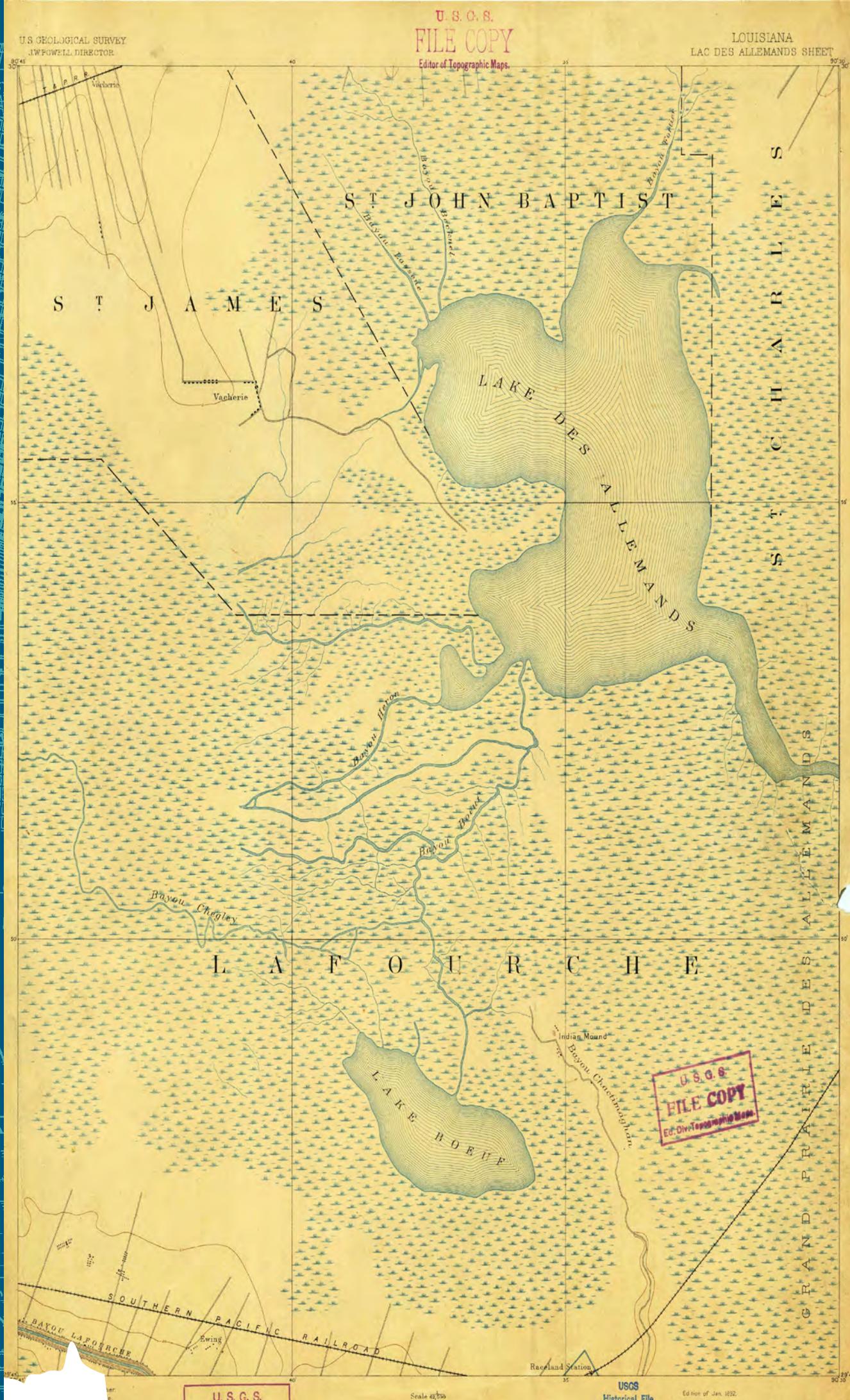
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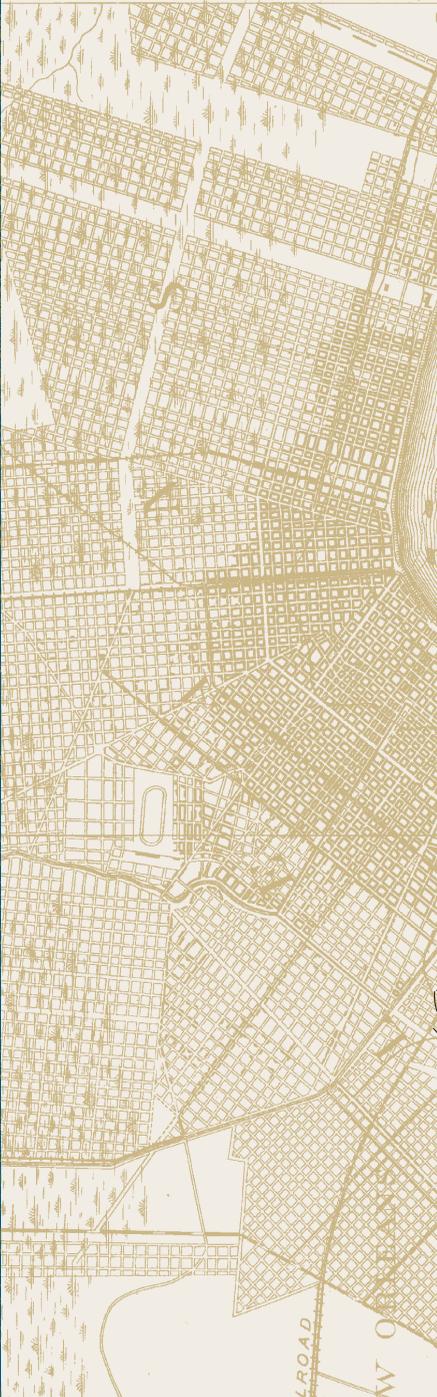




CRESCENT CITY SENSE OF PLACE AND A NEW DESIGN ECOLOGY

An autoethnographic exploration of identity, place and graphic design

Susan E. Matherne



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