

# Enter An Environmental Field

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One of the key missing concepts in contemporary design theory is a way of conceptualizing the situation and condition of designing. I want to focus your attention on the need to describe the environment of environmental design itself. I am talking about the place where designing takes place, and want to propose a new vocabulary and way to think about it.

In order to do that I believe we will need to leave organism/environment language behind, because it is too hard to describe a “situated, decentered, valuing process of designing, which is integral to the continual formative becoming of a place” in such crusty terminology. In much the same way that systems language has been able to detour around dualism for the development of concepts such as autopoiesis, I believe it is time to enter an environmental field.

Generating the field concept...

1. It is widely held today that designing can be usefully and very generally described, as a social-cultural process for changing existing situations into preferred ones. This Herbert Simon definition, used presently by the international Design Research Society, serves as a common base to unite the many design fields that make up the organization – from product design to planning. In environmental design, a term I’ll use to narrow the discussion somewhat to the planning and design professions, a paraphrase might be, **the changing of existing places into preferred ones.**

I’ve written about this elsewhere as describing a “perceived environmental difference,” or more simply as a perceived gap between what we have and what we would prefer. Of course this immediately raises questions about who the “we” are, the nature and construction of “their/our” perception of the existing situation, and the social construction of “the preferred.” My position, regarding this environmental gap, is that it is a normative matter at both ends and through and through. The whole process is involved with matters of perception and social construction and better conceived as a valuing continuum. I call the process environmental valuing. Valuing unites socially constructed intentions with their value expressive and embodied expressions.

2. For some years I have said, probably as a reaction to the persistence of the Picturesque in landscape architecture, “You can look at the landscape all you want, but you are in it.” This has been a way of drawing attention to the situated nature of our landscape experience and a reminder of the severe limitations of the merely scenic in planning and design. Others too have noted and attempted to describe this in-ness. Philosopher Arnold Berleant, for example, in his book *Environmental Aesthetics*, describes it as being “in process with environment,” in an attempt to erase, or at least to begin to dissolve the artificial boundaries that human thinking has created between organisms and their habitat.
3. Today, however, I prefer to go a bit further and to say, “**You are in the landscape, and the landscape is in you,**” because I think it is especially useful to combine the two ideas into a new whole - an incorporation of people in and thinking together about their place I call an environmental field. In the first half of this idea we (people, humans,...) are included in the physical continuum of an environmental ecology. This has become a commonplace in ecological thinking. In the second half, people are aware that environmental experience is a socially constructed representation. The mirror-like construction of my sentence is an attempt to capture the circularity and simultaneity of this process.

4. This is an inclusive idea of ecology as interwoven systems of matter, energy and *information* along the line of thinking opened up by Gregory Bateson in his books, *Mind in Nature* and *Steps Toward an Ecology of Mind*. I call this merger an environmental field, hoping to call up the image of a dynamic place, materially and physically present, expressive of its earthly evolutionary history, and alive with the human adaptations, transformations, possibilities and trajectories of “human natural selection” that are always underway. Bucky Fuller called this mixture “evolution 1 and evolution 2.”

It is of course one thing to imagine this idea from the outside as a mental framework and another to step inside the process. This is to take a step beyond structuralism into a poststructuralist world. It is also a matter of putting the head back onto the body severed in an earlier century when we mistakenly put Descartes before the horse.

In a poststructuralist world, the structure {horse/cart} is not a system described by an outside and detached observer, but a cart that is being purposively pulled and that someone is guiding somewhere. In the valuing structure {interest in something} or backwards if you prefer {something of interest or concern}, (note the valuing strategy of merging of subject and object together into a continuum) the same applies.

One enters the valuing structure when it becomes obvious that it is our valuing minds

(our thinking, feeling, willing minds, thinking about places, feeling strongly about their less than satisfying conditions, their future potential to satisfy our needs as they are presently perceived, our desire to make improvements, to make things “better,” and our willingness to make the commitments necessary)

that create the conditions for environmental transformations in the field. And it is our valuing minds that measure the progress and resolutions from this designing (e.g. decisions, expressions, policies, plans, actions...) and find them meaningful, i.e. and evaluates them as significant, successful, and satisfactory.

Certainly one of the primary and most powerful ways of representing how the landscape is in us (or how we are in environment) is through language. We use language and concepts to think about and process our environmental experience. This discussion is, after all, about an environmental design concept. But I don't think one has to take what has been described as “the language turn” in the poststructuralist world so far around the bend as to believe that language is the only important medium involved in human thinking. Certainly I think it goes too far to say that, landscape is language, as Anne Spirn does in “*The Language of Landscape*.”

The environment we are an integral part of, the landscape that resonates in and through our felt-lives is far more. It flows in us as air, water, energy, matter, but also simultaneously as information: ideas, myths, symbols, stories, images, interests, hopes and dreams.

Visual thinkers know that sometimes it is the image or diagram that comes first and the building of a sequential explanation that follows, and it is usually even more mixed. This is especially true for complex design situations, where there are so many kinds of relationships under simultaneous consideration that language becomes just too linear (too much like birds on a wire) to keep up, all by itself, with the rapid overlapping and processing of thoughts, images, maps, diagrams, feelings, systems, gestures, interests,

attitudes, desires, fears, needs... And then, of course language becomes indispensable again for creating a narrative that can communicate the experience.

Consider the following typical environmental design situation as portrayed as an environmental field:

←	↓	→	→	←	→	→	→
↑	←	←	↓	→	→	→	↓
→	→	→	←	→	→	↓	↓
→	→	→	→	→	↓	↓	↓
←	←	↓	↓	→	→	→	↓
←	←	↓	←	→	→	→	↓
←	←	↓	←	←	←	↑	↑
←	↓	↓	←	←	←	→	↑

In this case let us assume the table above represents the members of a small community, some of whom have brought their interests and concerns to the table, so to speak. The situation and therefore the field exists because there is a common desire to change an existing condition in their town – let’s say to increase the amount of affordable housing on some city owned land – and to take some action together.

The field, represented by the table, no doubt far too simplistically, uses four directional arrows to portray the divergent and contradictory views of the people involved. In this particular instance the matrix is intended to represent a complex state of understanding and resolve, people going in four directions, quite unlike the coherence of a school of fish or a flight of plover. They have a richness of differing views of where they are and where they want to go, all of which needs to be acknowledged, respected and included in the process. Of course if this were a deeper diagram, adequate to the field idea, we would also be able to visualize the relationships between the N, S, E, & W, “points of view” and the place under consideration, a connection that is central to the concept of an environmental field.

For most experienced planners and designers, this is a familiar circumstance, especially in public community work. People who come together purposively about environmental planning and design problems have a common felt-need to do so, but not necessarily a common story about where things stand in the place under consideration. If they had a clear and coherent vision of where they were and what was wanted, and were able to rehearse the various possibilities and their consequences themselves, it would not be necessary to turn to planners and designers for their expert help.

The designer’s role is to provide leadership in teasing out the perplexities of the present situation and help in overcoming the inertia of the field to change. This requires helping to construct a common story for change; helping to generate and rehearse achievable possibilities which in turn help reduce the fear of change; searching for appropriate expression for the desired changes, which will become the framework for new meaning; and helping with the process for deciding to transform. All are important fieldwork activities.

But let us leave for another time a discussion about designing and decision-making in an environmental field and try to pin down a few more important aspects of the field itself.

Here, then, are some of the basics of the idea:

- It situates the social process of environmental change in both people and place, nesting, interlacing and integrating one within the other, merging the two into the one.
- It uses the idea from physics of a field as a conditioned space, but adapts it to describe a place that is conditioned by ideas, interests and desires as well as, and especially in relation to, its present physical situation and condition. There is no attempt here to undermine the importance of scientific information or such venerable practices as site analysis in the process. It is merely to underscore the fact that “facts in place” in this process are better understood as interpretations, evaluations, analyses from a point of view - as place information in service to intentions.
- It helps us visualize complex place change situations as fields of interest and opinion and as social processes integrated with their ongoing physical adaptation and evolution.
- It emphasizes place change as a dynamic, complex and situated social process.
- It provides a strategy for overcoming the subject – object divide built into the way we think and new language to describe this rediscovered wholeness, e.g. environmental field, environmental valuing, the valuing mind, perceived environmental difference...
- And it wraps the field around designers and designing.

You have entered into the field when you have realized that you are one of the arrows in the above representation and are entertaining (and perhaps being entertained) with the realization that you are an arrow in the field thinking of yourself as an arrow leading environmental change.

Eugene  
Dec. 7, 2003