

Vincent Scully Prize Ceremony, November 5, 2009
Version H,
Message from Christopher Alexander

When the Scully Prize committee approached me with the news that they hoped I would accept the 2009 prize, I agreed, and expected to provide them and the audience at the 2009 ceremony with a brief lecture that expressed a deep seated and probing discussion of the nature of building form. It was my intention to make this discussion almost entirely visual – an essay governed by the content and character of the buildings I had built during the last 40 years.

I have, for years, been selecting slides of my work with the purpose of drawing attention to the interior morphological character of those buildings that come closest, in my opinion, to my own aspirations as an architect. I now suspect, too, that these are similar to the aspirations of the Scully Prize itself. I have been thinking long and hard about the stated purpose of the Scully Prize, the goals of this Prize, and the intentions that were set forth by Professor Scully himself. Whether I have hit the target in that regard, the future will perhaps let us know. But these intentions, as they are reflected in the human character of the slides, have now also come, in my mind, to be identified with my own aspirations during my working life as an architect.

Unfortunately, tonight I am not able to be with you in person, due to the devastating case of pneumonia which I have still not overcome. I very much regret missing the opportunity to speak with you directly. Instead, I have prepared a written summary of my lecture, and have asked my colleague Randy Schmidt to read this summary to you.

My fundamental proposition in the lecture is that our environment – our built world – must originate with the ideas and feelings and relationships that bring society to life. We need to construct our environment in such a way that the environment itself (its structure, its relationships, its internal configurations) must always derive from the living structure of society, of human action, the geometry of human configurations and of our relationships to the land, and to our own private and public personae.

This means that the environment, viewed as a microcosm, must consist of many small relationships among things, and these highly personal relationships exist at a variety of scales. The environment will come to life for us if and only if it is built from generating relationships inherent in the acts of our daily lives. The more we are able to rehearse our social and psychological relationships and reinforce them, the more we will be

comfortable, at ease, and whole within the fabric of all that we have made for ourselves. That is because it is, above all, a human endeavor.

In contrast, the less well we succeed in fitting our environment to the small details of the social and human relationships of our society and culture, the more *misfitted* we shall be in our world, and the more unfortunate we shall continue to become.

Logically, this is a very simple scheme. We need to assess and reckon up the human and physical relationships on which we thrive. Then we need to construct, realistically, the physical relationships which, when built into the fabric of our environment, will nourish our social and emotional lives.

Each physical circumstance produces a different way of being and feeling. Each provides a direct and profound relationship between the physical configuration and the experience of feelings that are generated by it. In the most positive environments, the effect is that the physical configurations cause people to release their capacity for life in specific and spontaneous terms.

For example, in order to simplify this idea, I shall refer to a number of configurations which can appear in our environment. In particular, I shall call these configurations which are most profound, most *trenchant*, the more archetypal configurations. They do the most work in making connections with human beings. Or, in reverse, we may say that people make the most profound connections with those configurations where the connections are the most archetypal.”

At present, and at the time of writing, I have identified about 20 of these archetypal configurations.

-o0o-

Each of these configurations pulls on the emotions of the people who are living or taking part in the configurations. The physical configuration pulls out, from the people who experience the place, some complex of emotions, images, and archetypal forms.

The words that follow are all similar, but they are not the same. They show how the mind activates itself in the context of the environment. As these examples will show, the environment activated by these configurations, depends on certain kinds of words, such as *Engenders...*; *Begets...*; *Spawns...*; *Provokes...*; *Brings about...*; *Elicits...*; *Gives rise to...*; *Prompts...*; *Produces...*; *Mobilizes...*; *Sparks...*; *Arouses...*; *Energizes...*; *Stirs...*; *Initiates...*; *Instigates...*; *Sets up...*; *Stimulates...* The elements which participate in any one of the 20 given configurations, will pull forth, from the emotions of the people who take part, whatever total, and holistic response which arises typically in that kind of archetypal configuration.

These configurations (and in a more complete version of this paper, there will be on the order of 250 discernible and different configurations), create a baseline of possible archetypes which mobilize people's reactions, their visceral and psychological responses.

-oOo-

I ask you, now, to look at about 250 pictures. You will see these pictures, one after the other, with short time intervals between them. The pictures will take five or six minutes to run. All the configurations describe ways in which the physical environment releases and activates our feelings.

The pictures you will see are not the high-style photographs typically practiced and presented by architectural photographers. They are, rather, pictures caught on the wing, caught in the moment, where the content of the picture and its feeling are the all-important thing. These pictures demonstrate, very simply, the kinds of structure that support life. They show a morphology in our surroundings that supports humanity and allows it to thrive along with the other inhabitants of our world. Life is never fixed, it's not perfect, but it is always recognisable, and it always shares a certain essence. I hope these pictures show a taste, a savor, an atmosphere that is the essence of living structure. It is always imperfect, just as it is, in part, perfect. These forms express life, and come from life, and encourage life in what is built next-door to them.

In some of the slides, you will see mock-ups and construction work going on. That is because the emphasis in all our works is on the **making** of things. We do not believe that a living environment can be created from drawings, or from machine-like activities. Rather, the work, and the beauty of the work – the inner

feeling of the buildings – will come from a dedication to using a making process that engenders life. In every case shown here, the Center of Environmental Structure controlled the construction process, as a process, and could therefore maintain this emphasis directly.

Run slides

Many of these pictures show **Archetypal** configurations. Looking at these pictures does something to us, inside; or, being in the presence of the configuration touches us, for reasons that are not entirely clear – yet are none less powerful in the way they work on us. They touch a core.

As we walk around the world, we find that certain buildings have a direct power to touch us, to involve us. Such configurations have a direct power to attach themselves to us. Our emotions, our thoughts, our feelings are mobilized by these configurations. We find ourselves “bewitched,” affected, moved. These are the places to which we gravitate. We come back to them again and again.

This is similar to the experiences we have in nature – in a grove of trees on a hilltop, in a canyon, next to a broad river in a gentle valley, the shore of a quiet lake. The same feeling can come from a door which has wide frames or borders; a long table for 6 to 12 people; a niche where people sleep; a window seat, an avenue; a gate; a small tree which stands purposefully and collects people, gatherings, meetings, music, through its configuration. For emphasis I will show two of these pictures again:

2. *A single window with apples framing it at the West Dean Visitors Center in Sussex, England.*

Slide of window

3. *An intimate alcove in the Linz Café in Austria.*

Slide of alcove

How many such places exist in the environments you know? It is rare, isn't it, to find such places? Yet it is the activity of making the environment with these archetypal qualities that gives depth to the places and what people feel there. I hope you can see the powerful role they play in our surroundings. These elements need to be brought out and used more carefully. I will attempt to be more precise about them in a more detailed follow-up piece to these remarks.

My deepest wish is to support people's deep core, by helping them to build up bridges, public places, that supports each person's strengths and elasticity, with the intention of creating places that engender well-being. If we try our best to make all the places in our contemporary world with such vivid depth of feeling, surely then something will happen that changes our lives.