

making sense of place

thesis proposal

The bridge swings over the stream with ease and power. It does not just connect banks that are already there, the banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream.¹



This poem by Heidegger illustrates the hidden structure of our world that is not immediately apparent to the casual observer. What is suggested by this poem is the ability for architecture to create place. Architecture reveals to us that which is unknown, giving our world new meaning.

There has been a loss of meaning in our physical environment, in our cities and our buildings. Christian Norberg Schulz argues that the changes in the structure of our cities following the conclusion of the second world war has resulted in the loss of a sense of place and meaning in human settlements. He attributes this loss to changes in the structure of human settlements. This structure he defines, in terms of space and character. *"Lost is the settlement as a place in nature, lost are the urban foci as places for common living, lost is the building as a meaningful sub-place where man may simultaneously experience individuality and belonging."*²

This thesis will focus on the concept of *sense of place*, and the hidden theoretical phenomena of *place* that give meaning to our everyday world. Place is a spatial experience, and I will be exploring it within the context of the city. My thesis will explore the locality of an active industrial port in Lake Superior's Thunder Bay harbor. Like so many port cities, the changes in transportation, technology and industry has left abandoned lands and buildings on the waterfront. The buildings and activity that once characterized the city and created its image are now the cause of its lost sense of place and loss of *imageability*.³

¹ Christian Norberg Schulz, Genius Loci, quotes Martin Heidegger from Language in Poetry, 1971.

² Christian Norberg Schulz, Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture. Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1979.

³ Kevin Lynch, The Image of the City. The M.I.T. Press, 1960.

My goal is to create an awareness of place on the local waterfront by introducing an architecture that *'gathers the landscape'* and reveal its true character and meaning to the city. This creation of public awareness of the value of the waterfront will encourage its development and contribute in the creation of a renewed *sense of place* and character that will enhance the city as a whole.

scope of research

My goals can only be examined through research into the theories of place and the architects, philosophers and theorists who have ventured into understanding the phenomena that give our physical environments a sense of place. It will also require the investigation into a sense of place with respect to the city as a whole and an understanding of what make places, cities and our lives meaningful.

To make this thesis successful will require the development of a building program that not only captures the culture, history, heritage and essence of place; but as well takes on the characteristics of its surroundings and by doing so makes its presence and the place meaningful to the observer.

*"Architecture literally and symbolically overcomes the forces of nature to provide shelter. In the pre-industrial past, the production of meaning in architecture relied upon structured references to and associations with nature. Modern architecture embraced the machine analogy instead of the organic analogy. Although machines are often designed on the basis of natural systems, their use as a formal model prevented architecture from referring directly to nature. This is problematic because despite technological advances, symbolizing man's position within the natural world remains one of architecture's roles."*⁴

Cory Stechyshyn
RAIC Syllabus, D9 - Thesis
ON-880006



⁴ Kate Nesbitt, editor. Theorizing A New Agenda for Architecture. An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995. Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.