

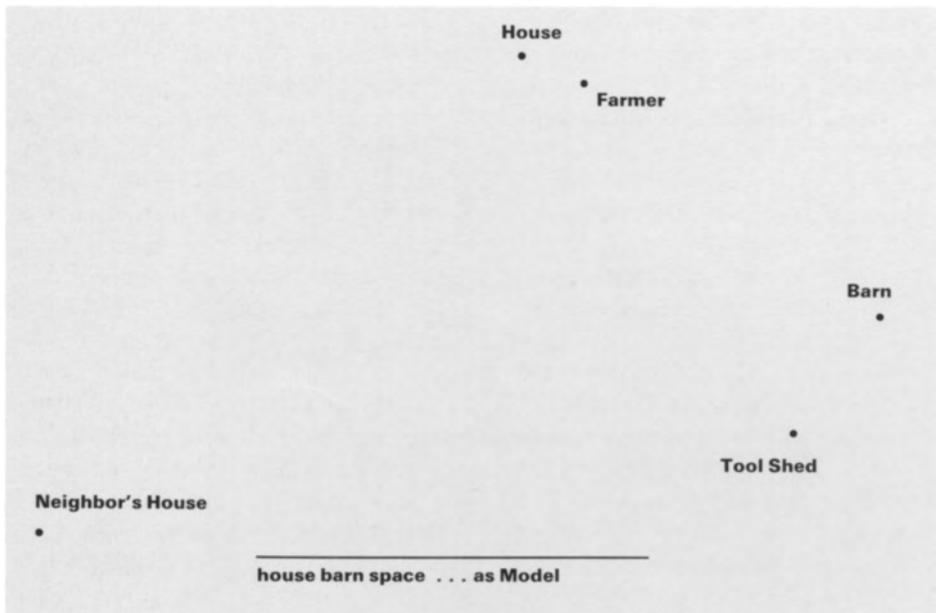
WALKER ART CENTER

[Essay by Siah Armajani]

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The farmer standing in the farmyard is generating a place that is near to the house and far from the barn. He represents a distance between himself and the house, between himself and the barn. He represents a measurable distance between the two. The neighbor's house stands far from the barn. The tool shed stands near the barn, or we could say that the barn as a "location" contains places that are near to it (the tool shed) and far from it (the neighbor's house). We also could say that the distance between the neighbor's house and the barn is filled with intervening points. These points are potential places where things and activities are gathered, gathering places not in terms of materials, but in terms of their nature as tools to be used, ready at hand. These places always refer to—and end in—the here and now.

In common-sense (or vernacular) building, such as barns, the structure, the framing and the boarding are open. These structures express the independence of tools and materials. The materials for the buildings cannot be overlooked, they are self-evident. The common-sense building exists not in "everywhere" but in its own place. In common-sense architecture, a log cabin's form changes with place rather than with time. Everything in the structure of the house rests upon its being a useful and reachable place. The house is not there to alter or enhance a given place. It simply is filling in a place. Filling in a vacant lot. People often buy old houses and move them right into their own neighborhoods.

The farmer has made room for the house. He has cleared the place so that there is room in which the house can be met, can be encountered. He has made room, so space exists as the emptiness in between. And he has made room, so space can enclose the house.

We enter the house, "not as a thing between four walls in a spatial sense,"* but as a tool for sitting, eating, talking, reading and sleeping. Each structure as a tool is in line of reference from one to another: from roof to arch, arch to wall, wall to chair, chair to table, table to porch, porch to fence, fence to location and location to places near and far from the house. Each one implies the other one. The hammer implies the nail, the board, the house, the builder, the user.

What we have on this farm are:

1. The objects around the farm.
2. The farmer's attitudes and procedures.
3. The totality of the two that is the basic framework in which we meet these things.

And the questions are:

1. How the objects are disposed around the farmer.
2. How the objects are perceived by the farmer.

What the objects declare is that they are open, available and useful. They also declare that the things the farmer runs into are not simply givens, but they are involved in a certain approach that makes them dependent on the farmer. Our approach makes ordinary things particular. This house or that barn. Our approach of this or that lacks a general explanation. This house here and that barn there depend completely on place and time. Even two identically made houses are separated in time and place. It is place that makes ordinary things particular. Place is generated in the encounter between the farmer and the house. Place is generated in the things the farmer points out, locates and makes specific.

Therefore, the house is something in between. What the house depends upon is some interplay with the farmer based on some truth upon which it stands. The truth is that the house built by the farmer actually shelters him and is no mere viewpoint. It is through action in concrete situations that the house has come to be of a certain character. It is an actual entity, the final thing of which the farm is made up. There is no going behind the actual entity to find something more real. The house as something particular is this house, but as a model of a house is something else, is something universal, a unit that moves through time and place. The model of the house leads to a good many separations. It loses its proper place.

The barn is in the farm.

The house is in the farm.

In stands for the relationship which the two entities have to each other with regard to their place in that location. The two entities, the house and the barn, extend toward each other in place at this location and both in the same way.

The location makes the relationship between the house and the barn possible. There is a relationship between a bench and a table if both are in the same room. Location is never clearly there. Location is never clearly apparent. Location is discovered, made clear and interpreted as we go our ways in our everyday dealings.

We discover the sunny side and the shady side of the house. We discover the way the house is divided up into rooms and the arrangement within the rooms. We discover these areas through our activities. The location has been split into places. The farmer is in the place.

The farmer is in the farm but not in the same sense in which a chair is in the room. The farmer and the farm are not related spatially. The farmer

is in the farm through his concerns, through his involvement with the things of the location.

Being in the farm is the basis of the farmer's constant contact and concerns with other things in their places which cannot be explained simply through spatial proximity.

Let's go back to the house and find two structurally identical rooms. One is a living room. The other is a dining room. Sets of furnishings have made one a living room, one a dining room. The furnishings are given all together as one in each room. All the furnishings together as one are discovered prior to any one piece. Each one is part of and belongs to the totality of all the furnishings which go to make up the living room or the dining room. A sofa here and an armchair there are not things that one ordinarily has a feeling for. By just looking at them and knowing the difference between them we cannot get anyplace. Only when they direct us into a place for living and working do they become structures for concerns. While it is the end that the furnishings serve—the work is a means to some further end.

Tools and materials are for the construction of a table, but the table is for eating, for some further needs and intentions. A table could become a shelter to sleep under or a step to climb upon to change a light bulb.

The living room lets the furnishings be. The room lets the chair be. "Letting be" in this sense does not entail a passive attitude toward them. The room does this by drawing each one into a totality. We let the furnishings be by using them within the context outlined by the living room. A good living room is essentially inconspicuous, since every chair, sofa, table, has a proper place and function. Since we let them be what they are, then we must have a notion of a living room before we can make use of them.

This prior awareness is not the result of knowledge. Its structure is not created by knowledge but by practical activities prior to knowledge. "Practical activities have their own sort of vision."* Practical activities embrace separate and distant entities into a synthesis that the built environment represents. Practical activities measure, encounter, investigate and manage.

In the course of our immediate activity we do not become explicitly aware of our environment, nor do we take explicit notice of every chair we use. The materials and spatial properties in the farm which were meant to serve go out of their private field into the public field. The public field is a notion of reference to the place in which activity takes place. The place is the necessary implication of being in the community. What the farmer permits is complete preoccupation with the work at hand. His immediate concern is not the farm nor the stuff in it but with the work which it is meant to perform. Knowledge also requires a certain distance, a negative contact, a withdrawal—and it comes about when there is a breakdown in one's activity.

The broken chair breaks the referential structure of the dining room. A gap appears in the room. A gap appears between object and subject. A gap appears between intellect and thing. The broken tool makes the farmer aware of his position in the midst of things. In fact, it is the limit of his experience at that moment.

It is to a farmer's own place that the farmer looks for his initial contact with things. They show themselves first as they are useful and available as tools and materials for work.

*Martin Heidegger





opposite
 Siah Armajani
Dictionary for Building: Garden Gate 1982–83
 painted wood
 95 high x 75 x 37 inches
 Collection Walker Art Center

Siah Armajani
Louis Kahn Reading Room 1982
 Permanent installation in the Samuel S.
 Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia
 wood, plaster, glass
 10 high x 24 x 17 feet

This space is a gallery for changing exhibitions of the drawings of the architect Louis Kahn. It is also used as a lecture room. The following poem by Walt Whitman is inlaid in the wood floor.



*When the materials are prepared and ready, the
 architects shall appear.
 The greatest among them shall be he
 Who best knows you,
 And encloses all and is faithful to all.
 He and the rest shall not forget you, they
 Shall perceive that you are not
 an iota less than they.
 You shall be fully glorified in them.*