William Turnbull, Jr.

The Sites We Build On

The author at Tobol, his home and vineyard in Knights Valley. Call @ (503) 845-8501
I am writing in response to your kind invitation to comment on “Images that Motivate,” the legacy of Charles W. Moore. In my zeal to uncover a compelling answer, by literally digging in my garden I have managed to throw my back in a painful fashion and have been grounded by my doctor. “Grounded,” of course is a good image in itself for me, but not one I had wished to prevent my presence at the symposium.

Thinking about this particular chapter in Chambers for a Memory Place, it seems to me that the last project I did with Charles and Arthur Andersson was indeed a chocolate sundae or, more specifically, a whole table full of them. The variety of buildings, from gymnasium to astral space to art museum, all with attendant residences, added up to complex with a level of complexity that rivaled the college campuses we all have been involved with. After working on the project for years, I found myself suffering the inevitable malady that comes from over-indulging in rich foods and I began to yearn for more simple fare, perhaps mashed potatoes?
Looking back, the 1980s in general seemed to be a time of surfeit. The Mountain View Civic Center and Arts Complex, which was a competition we actually won from Charles, is another example of excessive form. The site plan, with its three inter-related courtyards is the best part, relating from the busy commercial street through to the quiet green park adjoining the library. The building committee, under the spell of Michael Graves, held us too closely to historical forms and Mediterranean colors, and the quality of the internal space and light are not sufficient to overcome the stylistic excesses.

The Foothill dormitories at University of California, Berkeley, also tried to solve too many problems in too limited a space with too little money. The building has its moments, as in the market towers for the dining complex and the wonderful resolution of frustration when the earthquake fault setback line was moved, yet again, during working drawings and we reacted by Joe slicing an arc out of the building and celebrating the cut with red paint and battens. These were small moments of pleasure in the frenzy of deadlines and committee demands.

By the 1990s, I yearned for what Dan Gregory, the California architectural historian, calls the complex problem of simplicity. The church that my wife Mary and I did for St. Andrew Presbyterian in the Sonoma Valley begins to achieve the serenity of place and circumstance that is fundamental to quality architecture. The little caretaker’s house on the Swift Property in Franz Valley, nestled in among century-old oak trees, also accomplishes this. Both projects talk about land and landscapes as motivators.

It occurs to me now when we talk about images that motivate, mine are not abstract or metaphorical but overwhelmingly concrete and tangible. They are the sites I build on, which are always distinct one from another. The shape of the ground,
the view, the quality and type of tree cover, the 
sun and the wind all have voices that I listen to 
and learn from.

Our own little house complex in our vineyard 
in Knights Valley gives me incredible pleasure in 
this way. Sited under the wind protection of the 
heavily forested hillside, it is a very simple compo-
stitution dominated by 60-foot-square lawn. The 
stone retaining wall at the seat level establishes 
the grass plane and the gentle rise to the stand of 
trees across from the way creates a declivity in the 
rolling landscape that becomes a place that the 
tiny buildings celebrate as home. The wood we 
used to frame the structures was milled from trees 
on the property that were felled by the wind, so 
the houses are a reprise of the landscape in the 
arquitectural form. All the sheltering roof con-
struction is exposed and the act of shelter takes on 
a visual importance, as it did at the condominium 
so many years ago.

There is no excess here. The dog tree divides 
the functional spaces of the house and converts 
into a porch with sliding doors to invite or deflect 
the wind. It becomes a place to eat, a winter mud 
room and a place where the dogs sleep. In the 
old words of Jean Labatut: “The maximum effect 
with the minimum of means.”

This interest in where we build leads onwards 
into interests of how we build. Maybe this is the 
great circle route to Princeton and the lessons 
of Louis Kahn. We are now finishing off a new 
winery now made of pisé, which is cement mixed 
with earth and sprayed like gunite against steel 
reinforcing rods and form boards. There is an 
elemental pleasure that comes from making a build-
ing from the very ground you walk on. Another 
interesting building, which has yet to start con-
struction, is a straw-bale studio whose building 
bricks are bales from the Central Valley rice fields. 
(I’ll bet when Kahn asked what brick wanted to 
be, he never thought of rice straw.) Recycling
waste materials to shape usable spaces seems wonderfully basic and emotionally rewarding.

Charles talks about the maturing, or aging, architect’s conundrum of whether to focus energy on limited fields of endeavor or cast a wider net. As I build more, I really want to build less, but invest in those structures a special spirit that resonates with the user, visitor or inhabitant.

You asked at the beginning for images that motivate; I stumbled across an image that surprised me. That image is of the marriage ceremony: two entities coming together to make a new whole. In a way, this is how I perceive architecture, especially the good architecture of the vernacular, which deals with common sense and the satisfaction of needs, both physical and emotional, and marries the land with the thoughtfulness and craftsmanship of the architect—builder for the use and pleasure of the inhabitants.

You talk about creating places that have the qualities of deep history, exhilarating presences, fundamental lawfulness, cyclical change, sparkling light and infinitely surprising detail. That image describes the cave by Condominium 9 at the Sea Ranch, but it could equally describe a Shaker community—such as New Ephrata, Pennsylvania. Marry the two and you have a timeless record of human inhabitation respecting the natural world.

As I drive through our landscapes, the places that lift my soul and delight my eye give me a motivating imagery for tomorrow’s complicated demands. May I have the wisdom to follow the star of simplicity, respect the goodness and chocolate sundae of complexity, and enjoy making my landscapes in garlic mashed potatoes and gravy.

— Bill