

## Architecture and Poetry of Place

We often get poetry submissions which comment about our “nature-writing journal.” We do publish many poems set in the natural world, which our journal was founded to encourage, among other reasons. But it’s a journal of place, of any place, not only natural places. The places that typically mean the most to us, especially as children and as we raise children, is the neighborhood we live in. *Windfall* is dedicated not just to place, but to the communities and neighborhoods where we live, where we typically develop the deepest, most complex “sense of place.” Incorporating these built environments into poems of place enables a more complex exploration of the relationships between people and the landscapes in which we live.

It’s particularly worthwhile to consider our built environment because it conditions us to behave in certain ways and not in others. A house whose kitchen opens out onto a deck encourages meals taken al fresco; a kitchen high above ground and far from an outside door encourages meals to be eaten inside. Narrow Victorian houses with tall and numerous windows encourage living by natural light; sprawling houses with smaller windows and many interior rooms encourage using artificial light. A neighborhood with good grocery stores and restaurants and pharmacies within a safe walk leads to different behavior than a housing development down the highway from a shopping mall.

Poems have long presented details of architecture in establishing character and creating atmosphere. *Beowulf*’s “wide-vaulted, gold-adorned” mead hall, Heorot, which “towered high with hornéd gables wide” and sports a “bright-patterned floor,” is central to the poem’s action. The atmosphere of Tennyson’s “Mariana” is set by the descriptions of the “moated grange,” a “dreamy house” where all day

The doors upon their hinges creaked;  
The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse  
    Behind the moldering wainscot shrieked,  
Or from the crevice peered about.

At *Windfall*, we're interested in continuing the tradition to create an authentic sense of place, but of real, rather than fictional places.

The most straight forward way to incorporate architecture into poetry of place is to center a poem on a particular building, as Philip Larkin does in "Church Going," which begins:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.

Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new—  
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.  
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
"Here endeth" much more loudly than I'd meant.  
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

In the first lines the poem clearly places us inside the church and presents the situation—the speaker has been bicycling past an empty church several days beyond Sunday and has stopped to look inside, which, we learn, he does regularly. The poem breathes life into the church with actions and sounds: The speaker steps inside, takes off his "cycle-clips," runs his hand along the font, mounts the lectern, reads part of a verse loudly, signs the book, and donates sixpence; the door thuds, flowers sprawl, echoes snigger. In moving us forward quickly with a narrative of actions and sounds, the speaker has directed our

gaze over many elements of the physical place: a door large and heavy enough to “thud” shut; matting, seats, stone, little books, brown flowers, brass, organ, font, roof lectern. The poem continues for five more of these nine-line stanzas of ten-syllable lines, imagining what will become of such buildings as fewer people go to church. The imaginings are not abstract, but embodied: The speaker gives us future “dubious women” who “come / To make their children touch a particular stone,” followed by a “ruin-bibber, randy for antique,” and then by a “Christmas-addict.” Though the speaker ostensibly dismisses the need for such buildings today, the poem develops a sense of the immense power and meaning and value of the place, even for the speaker.

A poem might also address the landscape in which a building or a house sits—its immediate neighborhood—to characterize the action of characters and to set the poem’s tone. The opening of T. S. Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” does just that:

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
The muttering retreats  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:  
Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent . . . .

The streets tell us that the neighborhood has qualities of tedium, argument, malevolence, and desertion. The buildings—“one-night cheap hotels” and “sawdust restaurants”—suggest an unattractive, far-from-upscale urban landscape. Similarly, with only a few lines in “Preludes” Eliot captures the sights, sounds, smells, and feel of Boston’s urban landscape around decaying buildings:

The winter evening settles down  
With smell of steaks in passageways.  
Six o’clock.  
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.  
And now a gusty shower wraps

The grimy scraps  
Of withered leaves about your feet  
And newspapers from vacant lots;  
The showers beat  
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,  
And at the corner of the street  
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.

With details of a gusty shower blowing newspapers and leaves from vacant lots and the broken blinds and chimney-pots, Eliot conveys the economics, season, weather, architecture, and landscape of the place, vividly and economically.

Besides focusing on the architecture or using its setting, a poem might also show people interacting in some way with the architecture to characterize them or to show their values or way of life. Ted Kooser's "Abandoned Farmhouse" is a tour de force of this sort of approach. The speaker considers each observable element of a farmhouse and its grounds to reconstruct the lives of those who lived there, and to guess why they're no longer there. The middle stanza:

A woman lived with him, says the bedroom wall  
papered with lilacs and the kitchen shelves  
covered with oilcloth, and they had a child,  
says the sandbox made from a tractor tire.  
Money was scarce, say the jars of plum preserves  
and canned tomatoes sealed in the cellar hole.  
And the winters cold, say the rags in the window frames.  
It was lonely here, says the narrow country road.

The landscape in particular suggests the core problem: He was "not a man for farming, say the fields / cluttered with boulders and the leaky barn," the first stanza tells us. And in the last stanza, "Stones in the field / say he was not a farmer." The speaker of the poem interprets for us the aspects of the house and its surroundings which he draws our attention to. Most poems make readers draw conclusions from

the chosen details, but with its thirteen repetitions of the words “say” or “says,” Kooser’s poem is giving us a lesson (rather than a model) in how to let a building and its immediate surroundings speak to us.

Poems of place might also explore the sometimes odd interactions of people and the architecture around us. In one poem, Theodore Roethke places a child on a roof for an exciting experience, with elements of architecture and landscape all alive and active, billowing, crackling, flashing, rushing, plunging, tossing, shouting:

#### CHILD ON TOP OF A GREENHOUSE

The wind billowing out the seat of my britches,  
My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried putty,  
The half-grown chrysanthemums staring up like accusers,  
Up through the streaked glass, flashing with sunlight,  
A few white clouds all rushing eastward,  
A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses,  
And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting!

The kind of building—a greenhouse—gives us enough context to understand the situation: A child has climbed on top of a commercial greenhouse on a windy day and is delighting in being there, while employees and others below are worried and beginning to react. The details of the greenhouse—its glass panes streaked and crackling into splinters under the child’s feet and the dried putty—give it particular character and make it an active participant in the event.

Poetry is at its most evocative when it uses exact, specific local detail. As Shakespeare’s Theseus says in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the poet gives to the “airy nothing” of imagination “a local habitation and a name.” We would do well to consider the “local habitation” part of Theseus’s formula in our poetry-writing. “Vernacular architecture” is the term given to the kind of construction practiced by ordinary people in a particular locale to build their houses and other structures without use of professionally trained architects. It uses local materials and methods developed to work well with the climate, weather, soil

type, and social culture. In contrast to vernacular architecture is “official architecture,” imposed by outsiders without particular concern about fitting in with the local area’s tastes, values, or styles—the Walmarts and glass-clad office towers, climate-controlled and artificially lighted so that every day seems the same, regardless of weather or season.

The vernacular idea can be expanded to include the landscape as well: The vernacular landscape has been altered by local residents to suit their needs, using local materials and methods developed to work well in their place. Streets that follow former deer trails, adjust themselves to the contours of hills, and lead from home to the center of the local community are typically vernacular; interstate freeways that cut straight through hills and established neighborhoods and farms to connect cities are typically official.

A poetry of place as we understand it at *Windfall* would ideally celebrate the vernacular and question the official construction imposed on our neighborhoods and landscapes without consideration of the unique qualities of the place. Vernacular architecture everywhere is being razed and the landscape developed following designs that seemed to work well someplace else. We might ask, what has distinguished the Pacific Northwest’s built environment from the built environment of other places? Wood construction, particularly with cedar, such as the cedar plank houses of the original people to settle along the coast? Cedar decks, rather than patios? Stone retaining walls, such as those built by early twentieth-century European immigrant stonemasons? What kinds of architectural structures are particularly Northwest, and deserving of recognition in poetry—livable tree houses? Henry Steiner mountain cabins? The many Works Progress Administration structures of the 1930s?

The Pacific Northwest has also had its share of architects who have worked with local materials and a local sensibility. Structures and landscapes designed by Pietro Belluschi, A. E. Doyle, John Yeon, John Storrs, Herman Brookman, Ellsworth Storey, Paul Thiry, Richard Haag, Maya Lin, and others have often created places that seem particularly “Northwest.”

We might also consider how the local architecture expresses our history and our identity. Cast-iron storefronts from the 1880s suggest the hopes and aspirations of early merchants in some downtowns of the Pacific Northwest. Victorian houses suggest English origins and models for some towns and neighborhoods. In this issue, Bill Siverly's "2015 Passes Away" points to "the white solstice strings lining my gothic roofline / the ghostly church of some religion no longer observed." The house's carpenter gothic architecture, common among older houses in the Northwest, suggests the spiritual role of medieval gothic churches, with the architectural and spiritual strands joining in the last line, in which the speaker tells us "I keep my nice lights shining, so men may find their way back to the heart." The architecture's history reinforces the poem's meaning.

Bungalows with comfortable front porches facing the street, a design which encourages conversations with neighbors and passers-by, indicate a kind of community orientation, and might be recognized in a poem that deals with neighborhood or community values. In the past few decades the construction of "snout houses" with faceless garage-fronts and an orientation toward a backyard surrounded by "good-neighbor" fencing suggests a higher value on motor vehicles than on neighbors. Condominiums, townhouses, gated communities, courtyard apartment complexes each tell a different story of how we should dwell in our chosen place. Poems of place might incorporate these physical manifestations of our cultural values.

Our landscape architecture is equally telling. Streetcar tracks and trolley lines suggest a different way of living than four-lane highways with "left-turn refuges" at intersections (refuges to protect cars, not pedestrians). Public artwork might be quirky and locally significant, such as beavers or elk at public fountains, or monumental and foreboding, as with statues of generals on horseback and presidents. In "Strolling to the Fountain at Director Park" in the last issue of *Windfall*, A. E. Hines considers his seven-year-old son's inevitable growing away from his father by presenting a scene that concludes with his son "running off / to dance in that sparkling fountain." The son's eventual

growing up and parting from his parent seems more agreeable when he ends up in a living work of art. And, more common than fountains, a town's sidewalks might be wide and spacious, with shade trees and benches, or narrow and dangerous, or nonexistent, as in many suburbs.

Large "official" architecture—such as bridges, churches, synagogues, mosques, and radio towers—also often tells the story of our place. In this issue, Tricia Knoll's "Inside Dam #1" presents an artifact of Pacific Northwest history, a dam, from the inside. We experience the sweating concrete, dankness, and dim wall sconces. The poem captures the era of construction, "Before anyone / imagined the need for fish ladders / to sustain salmon." From that point in the poem onward, the dam is "tomb"—providing life-giving water to a metropolitan area, and possibly death to fish runs. Many Northwest architectural structures evoke similar ambivalence, which poetry is well suited to capture.

The presidential proclamations of "national monuments" recognize the historical and cultural significance of particular places. The designations have been used to protect pueblos and other first-peoples structures in the Southwest as well as islands, volcanoes, canyons, caves, fossil beds, and petroglyphs throughout the US. More recent architecture has also become recognized as national monuments: President Obama's conferral of national monument status this June on Greenwich Village's Stonewall Inn—the site of riots in 1969 considered to be the start of the LGBT movement—turns everyone's attention to a particular architectural structure and its surroundings as a special place. That's a role of poetry as well: to make a place publicly significant.

Other poems in this issue demonstrate additional ways to bring in the architecture of a place to increase the complexity, resonance, and verisimilitude of the poem. Maggie Chula's "Oil Train Derailment" gives us an ice-cream shop: mothers are sitting licking cones while waiting for children to get out of school when sixteen oil cars erupt into flames as they are passing through town. The proximity of an ice-cream shop—the epitome of innocent pleasure—to the burning Bakken oil train, emblematic of our insane addiction to fossil fuels, might give a reader pause.



Dianne Stepp's "Winter Break at the Old Lyle Hotel," also in this issue, like Philip Larkin's "Church Going," uses a particular architectural structure, the 1905 Lyle Hotel in the wind-swept Columbia River Gorge, as its setting. The entire poem centers on the activities of people in and around the hotel to evoke the winter-time atmosphere of the place—not just the hotel building, but the "tramp of feet up the path from the river, the yellow light of the lantern, creak of the old ferry, sheep baaing from sheds by the dock." The "broken tracks," "abandoned highway," and chunk of basalt "half the size of a car" lying in the middle of the road give a good sense of the immediate neighborhood, as in the opening lines of Eliot's "Prufrock" and "Preludes."

Tom Wayman's "House Made of Mist" in this issue returns us to the poet's task of giving "to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name." Part one presents the speaker's house, showing us glimpses of deck rail, door, and shingled roof, telling us of a new chimney, a stove, and windows, and describing the surrounding landscape of ridge, lawn, birch, spruce, meadow, fir, pine, and fog. Part two discusses words, which "can be plein air / as charcoal or watercolor sketches." To the "airy nothing" of the process of writing, the speaker gives the most local habitation—his own dwelling—to parallel the act of writing with the activity of the fog swirling around a house. The weather, the trees, the contours of the land, and the house itself become the vehicle for exploring the idea of writing.

We close with a poem that demonstrates an informed awareness of both architectural structure and geological history while conveying a pleasing sense of place. Joseph Stroud's "Foundation Work: Shay Creek" presents the precise details of someone working with the foundation under a cabin in the Sierra Nevada, work whose necessity is explained by the geological history of the place:

FOUNDATION WORK: SHAY CREEK  
All summer that first year working under  
the cabin where some idiot years before  
had built a post-and-pier foundation

on six-foot centers. Didn't he know  
this is earthquake country, that Shay Creek  
sits on a fault where two plates collide,  
one grinding under the other, uplifting  
a mountain range four hundred miles long  
and still rising. So all summer I shored up  
the foundation, put in new 4 x 4 posts  
three-feet on center, built cross-braces  
and plywood shear walls—all summer  
down there, in the dead air, handkerchief  
tied over my face, like a bandit, sweating,  
breathing hantavirus, bent over, back  
aching, cracking my head on floor joists—  
and the thing of it all—no one  
would notice, would ever see the work,  
and soon enough I wouldn't think of it,  
sitting on the porch in the afternoons,  
light slanting through the pines, maybe  
drinking a little wine, reading poems,  
attending quietly to someone's words,  
not thinking about what holds them  
together, how the sounds cohere,  
unaware of the foundation under it all,  
the hidden labor, the bedrock of song.

—for Clem Starck

The poem uses exact terminology for a typical cabin in that locale: “post-and-pier foundation,” “six-foot centers,” “4 x 4 posts,” “three-feet on center,” “cross-braces,” “plywood shear walls.” The poem likewise uses geological terms to explain the need for the foundation work: “fault,” “plates,” and a lot of verbs: “collide,” “grinding,” “uplifting,” “rising.” We then are treated to amusing descriptions of the speaker working “in the dead air, handkerchief / tied over my face, like a bandit, sweating / breathing hantavirus, bent over, back / aching, cracking my head

on floor joists”—the hantavirus an authenticating detail for the place. Our payoff at the end is the metaphorical use to which the cabin’s foundation and geology are put in talking of the invisible workings of the words and sounds of a poem, while sitting in that particular place, with “light slanting through the pines, maybe drinking a little wine.”

We would be delighted to publish such poems that explore the relationships between people and the built as well as the natural landscapes in which we live.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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