

*"How does an acorn become an oak?" we were asked.*

This was the first time a question triggered our curiosity and visual imagination simultaneously. *Systemic thinking—seeing the whole, transformation—everything changed in that moment.* The answer was ultimately unknowable yet this was strangely reassuring. We understood that searching for the answer would sustain our curiosity for a lifetime. Curiosity is the mental equivalence of inhaling and exhaling. The question was intended to make us ponder the nature of creation itself.

"We can describe what we see, but we cannot really explain it," the speaker added. We were puzzled by this statement. What was the difference? To us, these words were interchangeable, yet in fact they weren't. Our intellects were being both expanded and fine-tuned. It was a great feeling. Things changed from that point forward. We began to think and talk a lot about PROCESS (*impermanence*), ORDER (*inter-relationships*) and UNITY (*inter-dependence*).

For the tree to emerge and exist, its internal code has to continually negotiate external forces and be responsive, yet flexible, within the limits of its genetic code.

**Structure and Freedom** In its early phases of growth it changed more radically than it would when it reached a more mature, inevitable state.

**Transformation** In subsequent phases of growth it would reveal one of the wonderful truths of certain forms of organic life—as it changed size, its surface area would keep pace with its volume. There was a relativity of growth and a constant similarity of form. This recalls the logarithmic spiral of the nautilus shell: the golden ratio, the system of proportioning that is one of the central ordering systems of modernism, and the basis of the aesthetic system of our teachers.

Embedded within creation (and the creative process) is an implicit ordering system to guide the spontaneous growth of an organism. It does this by setting internal limits (not boundaries) that inform each exchange that takes place internally, with the interface and with the environment in which it was embedded. We had been taught that every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

**Reciprocity** The overall system of choices essential to an organism's survival are part of its imprint. The more diverse the system of parts and the more coordinated its response, the greater the duration of life. To ensure survival, it must "remember" all of its prior responses as a frame of reference for current and future decisions.

*Memory and action need to be in balance.*

*Memory is slow.*

*Action is fast.*

**Conservation and Change** All of this conjured (concurrently verbally and visually), the idea of a system of infinite relationships between all things. Worlds within worlds; all with inextricable complexities and with the simultaneous presence of disparate elements that converge to determine every moment. We imagined that the promise of architecture was to weave it together into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world.

**Unity and Diversity** We repeated out loud, "We can describe it but we cannot explain it." From the moment of conception to the moment of birth, we are the embodiment of creation. For the full term we are in a state of perfect symbiosis. There is a preconscious unity with the environment, an embryonic somatic memory of wholeness and unconditional unity are being imprinted. Two as one. The womb is weightless. It is our "third skin." At the moment of birth, we experience a profound separation, the most fundamental discontinuity of our lives and one that we spend a lifetime trying to overcome. Our creative work can be a way to reintegrate an apparently complex and discontinuous world, giving us a renewed sense of belonging, a part of a greater whole once again. The birth process can also be one of liberation.

The human body's relationship to the universe may be equivalent to the DNA molecule's relationship to the body. Fifteen billion years may be enfolded into us and a deep core memory of all that we will eventually need to know to exist is present at the moment of birth. If so, we are potentially all-knowing. Through a mirroring of the outer and inner worlds, triggered by light and enhanced by our other senses, an unfolding begins. Every moment is a learning event and we are a learning organism. Our interaction with others and with the world is a spontaneous experiment that enchants us and fills us with wonder. The body has the most extraordinary abilities to sense, process, store, retrieve and act. We can describe it but we cannot explain it.

As it moves through space, a subtle transaction exists between the body-mind complex and the world. Everything around us teaches us about the world we create for ourselves. Who we are and who we become are inextricably linked to what we make and inhabit.

*Our relationships are conditional. The observer is the observed.*

*Architecture has become a "third skin."*

#

## Synthesis to Distillation

The projects selected for this book cover a period of fifteen years; a full cycle of life experience and expression and half of a generation. The works are products of the same gene pool and reflect certain tendencies, but from the first to the last they represent an evolving world-view and life intentions.

The book begins with the *New Jersey House*, a work that explores formal and spatial propositions within a conceptual framework that sees architecture as a semi-autonomous discipline with its own history, theories, and logic. Our organizational strategies were directed by our curiosities about the notions of order that extend beyond the confines of any particular theory and permeate the whole infrastructure of concepts, ideas, and values. Specifically, we wanted to explore the nature of complexity and our ability to be thrust to the edge where it meets randomness. Our formal interests were focused on a synthesis of diverse elements into a coherent whole. The spaces were abstractly figured and continuous throughout; they had limits but no boundaries.

*We still practiced with the belief that architecture gave form to life.*

The prelude to this project is *CDLT 1,2*, a house with the same intentions but on a much smaller scale. The difference was primarily in our methodology. For the duration of the project, five years, we worked improvisationally at full size and in real time with "no erasers." If we made a mistake, the rule was to work on it until it looked intentional. We wanted to rediscover the "Beginners Mind" of which Suzuki Roshi spoke.

At the back end is *Prairie View*. Architecturally, it is a distillation of components into a coherent whole. It is slow and implosive. The creative sequence begins with the body moving through space and then form, back and forth. It is primarily conceived as a place where design is transparent to experience, and all activities, informal and formal, are seen as a curriculum for learning in the broadest sense. The spatial organization, primarily open and continuous, is intended to promote cooperation rather than competition. *Resistance and interference are the means for creative heat.*

The pivotal projects between the *New Jersey House and Prairie View A&M School of Architecture* are the *Dorland Mountain Art Colony, Carlson Reges Residence, Sinte Gleska University, Forest Refuge, and Warehouse C*. *Dorland* helped us develop what we call our teaching-practice, a "finishing school" for recently graduated architects. Also, the extreme limits of budget and remote location forced us to make a building with no "body fat." The residential project was a move toward a more straightforward and construction-based logic where intensity of spatial experience took precedence over detailing. This was also the most fluid collaboration with a client to date. From that experience, we now believe that the quality of the architect-client relationship and the architecture are directly proportional.

The University project immersed us into an ancient culture searching for meaning in a contemporary world. This was our first experience with a landscape that was beautiful, vast, and varied; one that could be experienced simultaneously, directly in science and through storytelling. We learned the meaning of a "spiritual landscape." *This project reminded us why we wanted to be architects.*

*The Forest Refuge* project deeply immersed us into Buddhist practice. This was a necessity for doing what we were asked. We had to merge knowledge and practice by "living the program," *discovering through direct experience the middle path, the centerline of gravity, and the stillpoint of a complex and turning world.*

*We searched for simplicity as it might be on the other side of complexity, one thing nested within another, an implosion, and a stillpoint.*

We began to search for an architecture that moved more slowly in proportion to the cycles, rhythms, and variable speeds of nature and the yogis themselves. The architectural language shifted from a synthesis of articulated elements to a distillation of "local" potential "experiences." The extent of the unfolding was solely contingent on one's consciousness, at any particular moment in a particular place. *Now, life gave form to architecture.*

In meditation, when the mind is quiet and focused, the body is still and the senses are acute, time and space slowly shift from horizontal to vertical. The yogis in their solitude "go deep" so visual silence is essential. *Warehouse C* was a jump in scale, impacting the core sector of the city, where people, commerce, government, cars, trains, ferry, and ships converged. Because of its size and configuration, we conceived the project as an "urban connector" extending from the city center across a rooftop promenade, the length of the wharf to the ferry terminal with its constant flow of people.

We integrated conventional land and shipbuilding construction techniques and logistics.

All the work with which we are currently engaged, whether it is large-scale planning, small design-build, or buildings for education or prayer, has the social and aesthetic values and code of the recently completed College of Architecture, which is an expression of "an architecture in slow motion"; *a distillation of life giving form to architecture*. The projects for the next fifteen years will continue to emerge out of a continually evolving world view but we expect they will have three things in common: *first, they will be our silent teacher, second, they will be a pretext for our relationships with each other and the world at large, and third they will be vehicles for our quest to make an architecture that recalls the deep imprint of our original pre-conscious experience of unconditional unity.*

As Thomas Merton wrote, "In the midst of a divided world we are called on to be instruments of unity. If we can understand something of ourselves and of others we can begin to share with each other the work of building foundations of spiritual unity. We are already one, but we imagine otherwise. What we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are."

*The promise of architecture is to help us discover our common ground of being.*