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Places

Title

Caring for Places: The Imaginations of Many

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2tr81669>

Journal

Places, 14(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

2002-06-01

Peer reviewed

Caring for Places: The Imaginations of Many

Places, and the values they embody, are a part of our national treasure. They are the stock of our built heritage and they structure patterns in our culture.

Geographical places provide the substratum of our daily lives: whom we encounter (neighbors, friends, shopkeepers, workers, tourists), how we move (on foot or bicycle; in car, bus, subway or train; how fast or how slow; how deliberately or with how much meander), where we conduct activities (in gardens or parks, porches, lofts, windowed rooms or extended areas of tempered air; in public view or sheltered and private; in halls straining for grandeur, sprightly little cafes, quiet back rooms or street-fronting emporia) and what is available to our attention (nature, nurture, technology, art, people).

In some measure, places construct how we think. Places, and the encounters their structures afford, condition their inhabitants' views of the world, and how they spend their days. They result from, and give flight to, the imaginings of many. Their familiarity can also conceal deep-seated common assumptions.

The wrenching rearrangements in our mental landscapes created by the horrors of September 11 testify to the ways in which the built world settles around us, brushing our thoughts in more ways than we might imagine. Even those who had no affection for that pair of blunt towers that rose out of the Lower Manhattan skyline have written and spoken of a haunting disorientation created by their absence. Those who lived or worked close to Ground Zero and survived know that terror in their bones, in a way that no image, however compelling, can possibly convey. They know that horror not only from the memory of the moment but also from echoing replay as they pass each day among reminders of plummeting debris and crumpled steel, and through the lingering, acrid smell of destruction. Those of us who know these only remotely must enter that horror differently, reaching for analogy, for a path to empathetic understanding.

The vacancy and its coordinates of loss beckon to be filled with another meaning. That meaning will need to penetrate our own places, our own lives. We need to consider not only the loss of certainties and the threats to our way of being, but also the privileges to which we have been privy and how we have sustained them. We need to consider what it is that we can share—close by and far away—and what we must cherish.

We need to learn what we each can do to contribute to a “world order” that is not dominated by the terror that has historically lurked within despair. We need to search for an order that is fueled instead by the prospect of building, along many paths and among many peoples, a network of constructive imaginings, both local and global. It must be a network that can promise—and deliver—not bombs, but places and lives that are filled with intelligence, health and joy.

—Donlyn Lyndon