



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1983 Volume I: Elements of Architecture

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## SENSES, SPACES AND STRUCTURE

Curriculum Unit 83.01.01  
by Bill Coden

“Who are you?” said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I-I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”<sup>1</sup>

Like Alice, my seventh-grade students would be hard pressed to answer the Caterpillar’s question. They are painfully confronting a crisis—adolescence. I wish to deal, in this unit, with three facets of this difficult passage from one developmental stage to another: first, the discomfort and unfamiliarity with changing bodies; second, the extension of abstract reasoning; third, the reaching out to others which is often belied by adolescent behavior.

My unit draws parallels from Professor Bloomer’s book, *Body, Memory and Architecture* as well as issues raised in seminar. There will be an exploration of the belief that the body experience is the most memorable and essential sense of three-dimensionality.<sup>2</sup> Our ease and comfort with our bodies, simply stated, will influence how we experience a particular “architectural” space or place, be it the classroom, the cafeteria or the arcade. In an attempt to foster this ease, I will concentrate on haptic experiences.

My research into the haptic sense was mainly in the area of art education, where a distinction is made between “haptic” and “visual.” When an individual responds haptically, he/she is concerned with body sensations and the subjective experiences in which he/she feels emotionally involved.<sup>3</sup> Touch and kinesthetic fusion’s are of the utmost importance, for they are the intermediaries of experience. When an individual responds visually, he/she feels as a spectator—on the outside looking in. The intermediaries for experience are mainly the eyes. Ideally there should be a fusion of the haptic and the visual.

There will be an exploration of the “clues” which building facades give us, moving into the realm of abstract thinking and reasoning. Does a building beckon us to come closer in a friendly manner or does it rudely rebuff us? Is a building public, private or anonymous? Questions like these can be answered by carefully examining how a building has been personalized.

Personalization is the act of taking possession of a building, completing it, changing it. <sup>4</sup> Personalization is not mere decoration or beautification; the establishment and expression of meaning, ethnic and group identity and status hinge on personalization. Rapoport suggests that we consider the meanings “ primitive” environments had for their users, for decorations were used to communicate complex associations. The meaning given to a place by the user is the center of study of the interaction between man and his environment. <sup>5</sup> The meaning a user gives to a place or space is frequently very different from the meaning assigned by the architect or designer.

There will be an exploration of the buildings which make up the community setting of our school. This will take place after my class and I have arrived at a working definition of “community.” Activities which foster a sense of community in our classroom will be an important part of the overall makeup of the unit.

J.B. Jackson states that the study of landscapes (urban as well as rural) should determine how they satisfy elementary needs—the needs for sharing sensory experiences which leads to a feeling of belonging. <sup>6</sup> Memory enhances this feeling of belonging. Our neighborhood survey in the Wooster Square area will try to determine factors which encourage-or discourage—relationships and bonds. These factors can, with some scaling down, be applied to our behavior toward people in another community setting, the school. The walls students and teachers construct are very real; the facade at times seems mysterious and impenetrable.

## **II.**

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Briefly stated, my objectives for the unit are:

to help my students develop greater ease with their bodies, their personal environments;

to extend body space into its immediate architectural boundaries;

to “read” the buildings in our neighborhood;

to improve students’ self-concept;

to improve, refine reading and discussion skills.

I intend to develop the unit as a Humanities course for seventh grade students whose reading, discussion and social skills vary. At Conte, the Humanities course has the integration of the arts and the academics as its main thrust. The unit could easily be adapted by language arts teachers.

## **III.**

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While it may seem strange, the study of various literary selections forms the core of this architecture unit. Again, using the body-sense as a logical starting point for the study of architecture, some of the literature chosen will deal with changes in bodies and egos. Early forays into the area of abstract thinking through the study of the concept of personalization, as well as an understanding of a sense of community, will also center

around literature. As much as possible, the study of the three facets mentioned above will be integrated rather than dealt with separately. Our reading and discussion of the literature will easily lead to related theatre and art activities; these activities will be invaluable aids in the study of the haptic and visual senses, personalization and community. The use of the body in theatre games will, I hope, lead to different perceptions in art as well as different viewpoints in discussion. Again, haptic experiences contribute to improved self-concept.

An on-going activity in the unit will be the development of a survey of the buildings in the Wooster Square area. The scale we will most likely use will be “public,” “private,” “forbidding” and “anonymous.” Careful attention will be paid to the narrative of each building we observe. As discussed in seminar, the narrative is the ability of a building to represent ideas other than shelter and practical function. The elements or qualities on our final rating scale will be the result of class discussions and readings and will be subjective (a characteristic of the haptic sense). The survey will be conducted while we’re reading and discussing *Our Town*.

Rapoport hypothesizes that buildings and spaces offer nonverbal cues to observers. <sup>7</sup> In order to “read” the buildings which will be part of our survey, we must rely heavily on the visual sense, since direct observation is called for. The haptic sense would come to the fore as we targeted and interpreted details.

The nonverbal cues a building or space offers can be *physical*, size and shape being the most obvious. Is there graffiti? Are there enclosing elements (fences, hedges) which might be interpreted as barriers? Are there links? Greenery, both controlled and natural, offers valuable cues about how the user (owner, renter) views his/her space. Is the building exposed or hidden? Is the space imposing or does it fade away?

Cues can also be *social*. A truly complete “reading” of a building or space will include the observation of people: their dress and behavior, age and sex. What types of activities do we find? What provisions are made for shopping? socializing? What objects (signs, billboards, decor) do the social activities give to the area? I would like the class to pay special attention to the social cues, since many students do not live in or near the area we’ll be studying. We will note the religious feasts, the Cherry Blossom Festival and our own school fair. Our school itself has a life after three o’clock; it is often the setting of neighborhood and/or political meetings. Ideally, it serves as a structural link in the neighborhood.

## IV.

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Terms and concepts usually taught when working on poetry, short stories, novels and plays will not be neglected, though the literature I have chosen for the unit will stress concepts discussed earlier: the haptic, the visual, personalization and community.

*Alice in Wonderland* was chosen because of the often comical, though no less frightening, bodily changes the main character undergoes. Her confusion about who she is and where she is will seem familiar to my seventh-graders. She encounters characters who offer advice, friendship and rebuffs. She makes mistakes and yet she quite literally comes through. The description of the March Hare’s house is a good example of personalization.

“The Eagle” by Tennyson also offers a sudden and very quick body change. The eagle’s descent from the crag is comparable to Alice’s descent down the rabbit-hole.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” gives us a landscape and house as characters, not mere settings, in a story. Vacant, eye-like windows contribute to the forbidding persona of the house, as does a barely perceptible crack in the facade. The narrator notes that “House of Usher” refers to the family as well as its mansion and speculates about how the decline of the physical structure has contributed to the decline of the social structure. Would a rearrangement or alteration of physical details make the scene less ominous?

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle* also offers a house as a character. To the two remaining inhabitants, it offers comfort and shelter, not because that’s what a house does but because that’s what this house *wants* to do. Very little description of the house is given; memories conjured by the likening to a castle will be important. Indeed, so much is held back that casual references to murder and poisonous elements of the landscape become all the more frightening. The kitchen is referred to as the heart of the house. After the house has been not-so-accidentally set afire by one of the main characters and ransacked by the townspeople, the kitchen is all that remains habitable. The sisters’ existence is limited to the kitchen; they have erected barriers to ward off intruders; they have limited their boundaries.

In “House-Warming,” Thoreau feels that living in one room which contains only essential items is to be desired. The fireplace is perhaps the most important element in the room; not only does it give warmth but it offers companionship—the sound of logs crackling and the faces and images you can see in the fire. Inhabiting or taking possession of a house means more than using it for shelter. Professor Bloomer pointed out in seminar that this is in keeping with Edmund Burke’s thesis in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* that a manageable environment becomes less threatening. Thoreau feels, however, that some mysterious elements (dark, lofty ceilings, e.g.) are desirable.

*Our Town* offers a wealth of concepts for the unit. Structure is important: the structure of relationships, of a community, of Life itself. Not so curiously, little or nothing is done with scenery and props. Our attention is not allowed to wander from the people who are playing out their lives before us. Using descriptive passages of Grover’s Corners given by the Stage Manager, and drawing on the power of memory, students will be encouraged to draw what some of the buildings *might* look like. Individuals might research architectural styles of the middle and late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. We will conduct our survey of Wooster Square, our “town,” during the reading of the play. -Memory is crucial in *Our Town* and in “Knoxville, Tennessee” by Nikki Giovanni. The power of memory in establishing bonds and fostering a sense of community will be examined.

## **Lesson Plan: *Alice in Wonderland* (beginning of unit)**

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- I. Physical warm-ups (shakes, stretches) which provide structure and release and exploration of limited body changes.  
Sound-Body Transformations: class/group forms circle. Volunteer goes to center of circle, imitates a stylized motion and a sound closely connected to it. Volunteer goes to a classmate, offers him/her the motion and sound. When the recipient can duplicate them, he/she goes to center and transforms the motion/sound, passes them on, etc. Participants might be encouraged to “freeze,” reflect on the changes they’re initiating, taking part in. Participants have the chance to be leaders as well as followers.
- II. motion and sound. When the recipient can duplicate them, he/she goes to center and transforms the motion/sound, passes them on, etc. Participants might be encouraged to “freeze,” reflect on the changes they’re initiating, taking part in. Participants have the chance to be leaders as well as followers.
- III. Class will read Chapter 1, “Down the Rabbit-hole” aloud.
- IV. Discussion:
  - A. What associations do you make with moving *down* ? moving up?

- B. Why do you think Alice shows no real fear?
- C. To what does Alice liken her shrinking?
- D. What disadvantage does the first change in size give Alice?

## Notes

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1. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Giant Illustrated Edition (St. Martin's Press, New York, N.Y., 1976), p. 28.
2. Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, *Body, Memory and Architecture* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1977), p.x.
3. Victor Lowenfeld and W. Lambert Brittain, *Creative and Mental Growth*, fourth edition (The MacMillan Company, New York, NY., 1968) pp. 258-260.
4. Amos Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment* . (Sage Publications, Inc., Beverly Hills, Calif., 1982), p. 21
5. Ibid., p. 34
6. J.B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins* (The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1980), p. 16.
7. Rapoport, pp. 106-107

## Teacher's Bibliography

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Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space* . Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. Philosophical work which deals with spaces and their influence on the poetic imagination. Intriguing chapters on the cellar, the attic, roundness.

Bloomer, Kent C. and Charles W. Moore, *Body, Memory, and Architecture* . New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977. Basis for our seminar and my unit. I found the book enlightening, encouraging and entertaining. Introduced me to new ideas; confirmed and strengthened ideas I had a tenuous grasp on.

Greenbie, Barrie B., *Spaces: Dimensions of the Human Landscape* . New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. Especially helpful in conjunction with the Bloomer and Jackson books. Deals with the facilitation of social interaction or the constraint—in public and private spaces. Photographs illustrate author's points.

Jackson, J.B., *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics* . Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980. Historical, rather than ecological, essays on the evolution of urban and rural landscapes. The book is delightfully readable.

Lowenfeld, Viktor and W. Lambert Brittain, *Creative and Mental Growth* New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968. Primarily concerned with art education. Clearly defines the concepts: of "haptic" and "visual" and gives clear examples. Argues for a fusion of

the two for optimum performance. Written from a developmental viewpoint.

Rappoport, Amos, *The Meaning of the Built Environment*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982. Nonverbal approach to the meanings and associations buildings give and have. Expands ideas Edward Hall presented in *The Hidden Dimension*. Interesting anthropological discussions, too.

## Student Bibliography\*

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Carroll, Lewis, *Alice in Wonderland*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976.

Giovanni, Nikki, "Knoxville, Tennessee." Widely anthologized.

Jackson, Shirley, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. New York: The Viking Press, 1962.

Poe, Edgar Allan, *Poe's Tales of Mystery and Terror*. New York: Lancer Books, 1967.

Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, "The Eagle." Widely anthologized.

Thoreau, Henry David, *Walden*. New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1980 Section 13, "House-Warming."

Wilder, Thornton, *Three Plays*. New York: Bantam Books, 1965

\* A brief discussion of my reasons for choosing these works is included in the unit.

## Audio-visual

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Videotape of ARTS channel production of *Our Town* (which I have at Conte).

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