

Notes from What I Have Learned, Oxide Points (40123)  
Charles Holden, Architect-BUILDER, year 37, late July

Long before choosing architecture as a profession, I learned from Tolstoy's use of "fatherland" in War and Peace, the importance of context; the influence of both the "matter" in and around us and the "patterns" that drive and are driven by us. For me, this duality is mother and father – *mater* and *pater* – of architecture, of life.

The Bauhaus inspired curriculum of site, structure, and culture at North Carolina State University's (then) School of Design reinforced this appreciation for context (as well as the act and art of building). This extended my childhood experience among North Carolina swamps, creeks, forests, and beaches; fecund places for man and nature, my "motherland." Floods, fires, hurricanes, and time reveal architecture that weathers well; natural forces highlight essential materials and their generative power. My mother asked our Cub Scout troop to frame one square foot of earth and record what we saw. The diversity reflected that of the larger world. Alternately, the railroad trestles we glided past in the sluggish tannic waters of my father's canoe trips hinted at the extension of manmade lines into the raw landscape, but now only an archeological shadow of its former activity. Objects now returned to nature, just as Camile Paglia's Sexual Personae argued that man could never be separate from nature: the ebb and flow of fluid, epigeal feminine forces and visual, ethereal masculine forces, rarely in noticeable balance, defining cultures over centuries. Whether in larger or more delicate scales, these forces shape modernism and equally, its popularity and obscurity.

But like those old railroad rails, good form, material, and spirit outlive the functions, economies, and inspiration that generate them. Good projects weather a change of owner with grace. Periodically I mentally apply a "salvage test". I imagine what in a design might survive an untimely death of the architect, an unfortunate change of client, or an arbitrary cause to demolish the building soon after construction. Within seconds, shortcomings are highlighted, especially regarding the professional context and social value of the work.

Through Priya Hemenway's Divine Proportion, I discovered that geometry was first conceived and taught without numbers. Conception – through lines and drawings for clients – is a consequence of reflection, bearing fertile duality; the joys and pains of birth. But that architecture depends on the particulars of that place, that spot of earth. To this we must adopt materials and forms that bring substance and honor to the space and its denizens. Yet the architectural thread that binds structure to place, the basis of its integrity, is generated by the passions and dreams and needs of the client.

It must be fun! A colleague, Christopher Newton, once described a building that we hoped to build as a "cool-ass fort". This evokes an important business model taught by Frank Harmon: "do good work, have fun, and stay in business." You can improvise and demonstrate your virtuosity, but it must support and complement what is around it, and who occupies it. And it should be built to endure, enhancing in value through care and nurture; never disposable. Under the tutelage of Elizabeth Lee, I learned not only how to hold a pencil, but the importance of simple pleasures and needs in architectural design. Christopher Alexander and others express this beautifully in their book, A Pattern Language. But building a house, especially for couples, engenders enormous stresses analogous to marriage, divorce, or death. Clients, such as Bill and Meta Ellington, have confided that had they known the challenges they might not have built, but in hindsight, cannot imagine not making their dreams concrete. Success like theirs most often follows clients who bring their own images – however inchoate and piecemeal on scraps of paper, pictures from books, old photos – to the creative process.

We modernists are not alone and we are evolving. Our success is the result of paying attention to our *mater* and *pater*, to our context and client's dream, and in so doing, the sustainable modern movement is poised to address many of the economic and social challenges that have hindered classic modernism for a century or more.

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