

# Layering

Much of American life in the early 21st century could be characterized as chaotic, frenetic, multi-faceted, even placeless. We are constantly on the move in the overloaded storm of the information economy. This is a new phenomena for human beings, and as such, we also have an equally innate desire to seek calmness, refuge, and a place apart. We can tolerate only so much pandemonium before bad things happen. The spaces in which we live and work should not exacerbate this condition, especially since the built environment frames much of our lives. We need balance.

In this new economy, much of what passes for building has little regard for its impact on the land, use of natural resources, or even how well it works. This is especially alarming in light of dramatic global climatic change. Displacement of nature continues as the order of the day; it seems land has been replaced by real estate, meaningful building replaced by style. Gone is a reverence for what, where, and how we build. For architects in the face of a global crisis, there is a moral imperative to tread lightly and to give more than lip service to real stewardship of the earth. Our very existence may depend on it.

As an architect and photographer, I have long admired the landscape paintings of Edward Hopper for their stillness, abstraction, and clarity of purpose. While he is noted for his gift to render light on canvas, there is a powerful sense of place in his work and it inspires a strong desire to create an architecture integral with the landscape, simple in form, pure in its line.

The art of architecture is the continuation of a long tradition. Le Corbusier once noted that to make a good building one must understand history: to find continuity with what has gone before, what is, and what will be. It is a difficult and complex process, and there are many layers of meaning to be explored, some social, some literal, some communal: all of equal importance. Design is choreography: a balance of time, money, and resources (materials) applied to develop these layered meanings into form. To be effective, it is incumbent upon those of us who seek to build to do so with the utmost economy and humility.

All building is collaborative: the better the understanding, the less difficult the process. The more anonymous the responsibility, the more complicated the decision making becomes, and the less satisfactory the result. Problems arise when there is a lack of trust, and a good architect aspires to give the client confidence and security. As a friend and mentor once told me, it takes good clients to make good architecture.

-jim rounsevell, architect