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Author:

[Lyndon, Donlyn](#)

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Caring for Places: The Expanding Public Realm

“Visit www.Places-journal.org.”

“Oh yes, I’ve been there.”

The ease with which we now use the phrase “visit” a website and then consider that we’ve “been there” is for some of us astonishing. Yet it is now commonplace.

It’s a testament, really, to how much we expect of place. That a location in cyberspace fixed in the mind (or on a keyboard) can also be a powerful mental device that creates the occasion for accessing layers of information, for connecting and intertwining ideas, images, and communications in spectacular arrays is “more surprising for you, than for me,” a young woman archly reminded me the other day. That locations in physical space can pose comparable potential might be less obvious to her. Yet the exchange took place over coffee and newspapers at the big common table housed in a local bakery of note, filled with smells of cinnamon, visions of circling fruit among passersby, echoes of past conversations and French customs. She was certainly not visiting it by accident.

Places in the open air or with easy access have long served to gather the public and bring them to share experience, whether through the symbols and voices of political rhetoric or through the many guises of market allure. At the heart of each transaction of significance, however, lies a private moment, an alignment of interests and understandings that shapes our actions.

The genius of electronic communication is that the array of connections can be vast, with little physical effort; the genius of place is that it can involve our bodies as well as our minds, and the full, informing presence of others, not just their abstractions; the full force of the wind and the sun and the tinkles and smells of lives lived multiply—of histories forming the moment and nature having its way with us. Places have breath. They live among us and they present what has been called the inconsolable passage of time; the course of human energies.

We now may enter the public in other ways, through media that traverse the thoughts (and manipulations) of a myriad of minds. The great challenge is to open and expand this great metropolis of the mind in ways that bring us back to, rather than lay waste to in disregard, the palpable realm of the corporeal—that gathering within the natural and constructed ecologies of place, those investments of practices, aspirations and resources that form the matrices for personal and collective action and structure our daily encounters.

Places is now launching a new and expanded website (www.places-journal.org) with links to the California Digital Library, which will make all that we have published in more than two decades available to all. We hope you will soon say you’ve “been there,” and that it will draw you into an expanded network of considerations; ideas with which you will turn to the places around you, engage them with more layers of insight and urgently seek improvement in the ways that we care for the world that is immediate, and which badly needs care.

—Donlyn Lyndon