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Caring about Places: Lasting

The surroundings embed themselves in our minds. Without announcement, they construct a pattern of thinking, an expectation about how things relate to each other that is a surreptitious accompaniment to the acts and decisions of daily life. The shape of things seeps into our transactions. We live with the memories that have made us who we are, and they filter through the actions of our hands into works.

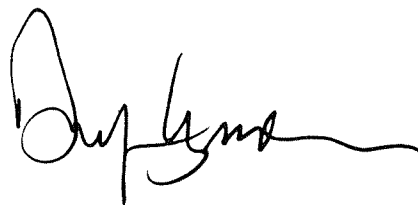
To gain mastery over our works requires close, continual attention. Sketching—watching with the hands—is one way of bringing the dimly perceived into focus, subjecting it to critical attention, programming a set of attributes into the hand muscles so that they may be recalled when appropriate. Tracing new relationships may reorder and reconstruct our sense of design possibilities even if the specific lines being traced will never be redrawn.

Sometimes it is also necessary to break the traces, to confront patterns in a new way. Close scrutiny and evaluation may lead to insights not available in the routine of our lives. Routine takes many forms: the habits of inhabitation, the strictures of bureaucracy, the conventional wisdoms of design process. Routines give structure to the world; some structures facilitate, some enslave. Distinguishing the one kind from the other requires listening to many views and watching for patterns that may not be described.

Breaking with routine may require recovering traces of memory as well as experimenting with the unexpected. A poem that strikes beneath the senses may resurface as the impetus to string polyethylene across the desert landscape. The assembly of specific tools gives shape to the imagined path. Similarly, the vision of towers gleaming in the sunshine may ride through an entire career, leaving its trace in specific landscapes across the continent. By sheer stubborn insistence, such towers gather unto themselves associations never imagined by their builders.

Tools—directed by the minds and hands of those who care—make places distinct. The range of tools varies with the place and the task, and their mastery is hard to come by. Yet to build with these tools is to make something that will last. To make something that will last well (in the mind or on the ground) is the primary responsibility of those concerned with places.

Despite the onslaught of hype and the endless stockpiling of the apocalypse, we can only hope that our society will conclude that lasting is an attribute we can afford.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Donlyn Lyndon'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Donlyn Lyndon