

The POWERS of PLACE

The Powers of Place

**An Inquiry Into the Influence of Place, Space and Environment
on
Collective Transformation**

by

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In the word the earth breaks silence. It has waited a long time for the word. Concealed beneath familiarity and silence, the earth holds back and it never occurs to us to wonder how the earth sees us. Is it not possible that a place could have huge affection for those who dwell there?

John O'Donohue

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I want to thank the people I interviewed for this study for their generosity of time, enthusiasm, and wisdom. I also want to thank the places they described for offering themselves as surroundings for collective transformation and spaces from which we can learn how to improve our world. To my own special places, those that held the reading, writing and conversations that produced this paper, I offer my gratitude as well.

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R. L.

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INTRODUCTION

While writing this paper, I took a short trip to my native India to visit my father in Mumbai. Having spent several months reviewing the published literature on the effect of place, space and environment on human beings, I was reminded, arriving in India, just how important place can be to one's identity. Indians know your place of origin by your last name. My maiden name, for example, Shirodkar, means, literally, "from Shiroda," a small town outside Goa. For Indians, this information places people in a context, a culture, a history, and can be as important a personal marker as looks, personality, or behavior. This is the norm in many other cultures.

Place, space and environment play an important role in the unfolding of our personal lives and our experiences and relationships with other people. They provide the context, or surround, for our feelings, thoughts and actions even though we may not be consciously aware of their influence on a daily basis. In my study of transformational group experiences, *Group Magic: An Inquiry into Experiences of Collective Resonance (2003)*, the place or space in which magical moments in groups happened was identified by over half of the study's participants as influencing their felt shift from a collection of individuals to a true collective able to think and work together. This was surprising to me since I did not anticipate this factor and did not ask about it specifically.

What you will see in the report that follows is an opportunity I have had, through support of the Fetzer Institute, to take a next step in investigating this surprising and intriguing finding. If place and space are experienced as significant influences on transformation of consciousness (individual and collective) in groups, e.g., the shift to group resonance found in *Group Magic*, what might we learn with focus on the following questions:

- What is the influence of place, space and environment on transformational group experiences, separate from other factors such as design of a meeting or gathering, topic, or facilitator skill?
- How is the setting perceived and described by individuals participating in transformational group experiences?
- What specific elements of the environment are most influential? Which combinations of factors, as elements of place, make a greater difference to outcomes?

- How can characteristics and qualities of place, space and environment—if more thoroughly understood—be more consciously included in the design of gathering places and guiding processes where collective transformation is intended?

These questions underlie and energize this inquiry.

In these pages you will find:

- (1) A brief review of the literature that explores the effects of place, space and environment, undertaken to determine what has already been discovered on this topic and provide a jumping-off place for the original research to follow;
- (2) A discussion of this research conducted as a pilot study including a summary of key themes that emerged from interviews with persons experienced and sensitive to this topic;
- (3) References to stories of collective transformation in different settings that inspire and inform; and
- (4) Suggestions for further inquiry, experimentation and implications around what has become known from this study.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Recognition that place, space, and environment play a role in our lives is not new. Over two thousand years ago, Hippocrates linked human health and specific natural settings, laying the cornerstone for Western medicine. He and other ancient healers identified a connection between illness and the “mal aria”—bad air—of swampy places (which encourages mosquitoes to breed) and, conversely, the healthy effects of breezy hillsides with good air circulation (Jones & Withington, 1990). Frederic Law Olmsted, a 19th century landscape architect and planner, also saw the relationship between health and place and specifically used it in his work (Jackson, 2001; Szczygiel & Hewitt, 2000).

Just as links between place and human well-being have been in human consciousness for centuries, definitions of the terms *place* and *space* are broad and diverse. The antecedent Latin term for “sense of place,” *genius loci*, referred not to a place itself but to the guardian divinity of that place (Frumkin, 2003). Canter (1997) saw place as a holistic unit that comprises three interrelated elements: the physical form, the activities that go on there, and the conceptualizations of that place [meanings and ideas]. All these together, he said, comprise the purpose for which the place is used. In Sanskrit, one of the most ancient human languages, there exists a word—*kshetra*—which means field or energy fields that are similar to electromagnetic (EM) fields in physics. These fields are referred to in the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of Hinduism’s central and oldest spiritual stories.

Howard Frumkin, in his excellent article, “Healthy Places: Exploring the Evidence” (2003), put it this way:

The features of a place affect us in many ways. We gain spatial orientation—our sense of where we are and how to get where we are going from place cues. Places can evoke memories, arouse emotions, and excite passions. Some places have spiritual resonance; every religion has sacred places, some natural such as the Himalayas for Buddhists and Hindus and some built such as the great Catholic cathedrals. Legends are grounded in places. Places affect our performance as we work and study. Some places—the social gathering spots that sociologist Ray Oldenburg has called “great good places”—help us connect with other people. Some places, as every vacationer knows, seem to enhance well-being. Some places may even promote good health. (p. 1)

Most people regard place as a subset of space, a kind of bounded space, either physically or conceptually. Physically, we may think of the walls, floor and ceiling as transforming open space into a building, or metaphorically we may refer to “a place in

my heart” where we keep a lost loved one. In a college-level course on environmental psychology, the instructor distinguished between place and space this way:

Space is more abstract than place. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. . . . Space is an abstract term for a complex set of ideas.

Indeed, when we think of space in the context of astronomy, there is a sense of infinity or unboundedness. Yet, although *place* connotes a more physical, bounded environment, it is also much more. According to Frumkin (2003),

While a place’s character is a function of physical qualities, it is also a product of risks and opportunities, the nature of the social organization attached to the locale, its political, social and economic relationships with other places, the psychosocial characteristics of the individuals occupying the space, and the local cultural milieu. We learn to act in specific ways in certain places; we don’t genuflect in bars or drink beer and eat popcorn in churches. (p. 1)

Although many people agree that we intuitively know that our surroundings play an important part in our lives—in our homes, places of work, neighborhoods and communities, vacation spots, and even our final “resting place”—there has been relatively little in the way of systematic exploration of its effect. In a cursory review of the literature on place, space, and environment, I came across the following approaches to the study of its effect on human beings. The categories are general and there are many overlaps, but for purposes of clarity, I have chosen to group them in the following ways. I apologize in advance for overlooking many studies and approaches; this paper and its antecedent research were not meant to be comprehensive nor exhaustive but only to open the door to dialogue and further inquiry (see Figure 1).

Place and space play a central role in the disciplines of art, interior design and architecture. In these disciplines, the approach is generally aesthetic and functional, responding to what is pleasing to the eye and useful for its purpose. Many opinions surround the topic, but for the most part, the approach remains subjective: what is pleasing to some is not to others. Frumkin (2003) described the guidelines by which authors in the fields of art and architecture write as “ex cathedra pronouncements”: they declare what is beautiful and what is not; what works well and what does not. These are interesting, he stated, but beg the question, “By whose standards?” Christopher Alexander’s work is an exception and is mentioned below in a different framework of approaches to place and space.

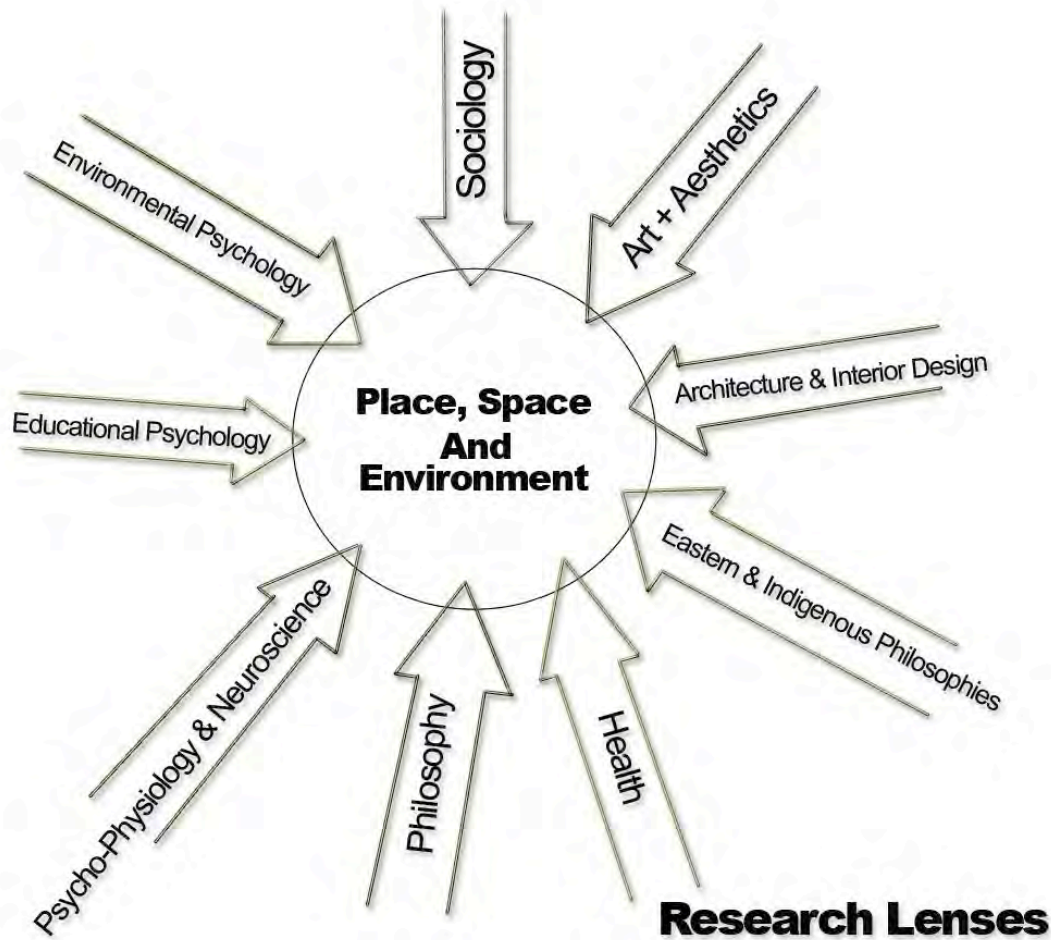


Figure 1. Research Lenses.

From Eastern philosophies and traditions come approaches to place and space that are based on beliefs that certain arrangements of furniture and architectural elements attract positive energy, or *qi*, into the lives of the people who live or work there. These approaches flow from an assumption of the existence of an intimate connection between the natural environment and human beings. Although feng shui, the best known of these approaches, is based on ancient understandings of astronomy and geography, it is considered subjective and not scientifically “proven” by Western methods. Also from the East come spiritual traditions such as Hinduism in which particular places are considered to be vortexes with special energies connected to particular divinities. Hindus visit these sites during important life events, such as the first cutting of a baby’s hair, weddings, and initiation of new work ventures. Again, because these places are part of a spiritual tradition, their power is generally not considered to be proven by Western scientific standards as energy vortexes, yet they are as basic to the life of a Hindu as food or shelter.

Indigenous and native peoples throughout the world also have a relationship to place, particularly land and nature, that is integral to their lives as individuals and as collectives. For example, invoking the wisdom of the directions—north, south, east, and west—to inform discussions and decisions is part of life in these cultures, as is sensitivity to elements of the natural environment, such as animals and weather, as messengers of wisdom from beyond. Because indigenous peoples do not see themselves as separate from the environment around them, little scientific study (requiring the assumption of separateness or dualism) has been undertaken in this arena. This is true of Eastern philosophies as well.

In the literature, another category of approaches to understanding the effects of place, space, and environment is qualitative research, often used in the human sciences. The underpinnings of qualitative research are anthropological in that human behavior determines how to organize setting. Principles or patterns are culled from interviews with people on the topic explored. I use Christopher Alexander and his colleagues in the field of architecture and the work of several researchers in the growing field of environmental psychology as examples.

In 1977, Christopher Alexander (with Ishikawa and Silverstein) published a book called *A Pattern Language* that influenced residential architecture, building design and city planning. The unique quality of Christopher Alexander and his colleagues' work was that it was based on thousands of interviews with individuals on how they use and experience buildings and public spaces. From this data, certain patterns emerged that became guidelines for making “great places” for people not necessarily trained as architects or city planners. These guidelines came from a more rigorous method—structured interviews—and thus distinguished themselves from other theories in the fields of architecture and design.

Another field of inquiry into the relationship between environment and human beings has come to be known as *environmental psychology* or *eco-psychology*. Grounded in the notion that people experience what renowned ethnobiologist and professor, Edward O. Wilson, Ph.D. (1984) called “biophilia,” an innate need to interact with the living world of which we are a part. My own search of the academic literature to date offered hundreds of studies and articles on subjects as diverse as the effect of the outdoors on quality of life for older people to the environmental psychology of workspace to the effects of environmental considerations on public health and adult learning.

Because of public awareness of our environmental crisis, biophilia now incorporates a wide variety of topics in which qualitative research methods are used to generate knowledge.

Key contributors to the field of environmental psychology are Stephen and Rachel Kaplan from the University of Michigan. The Kaplans' (1989) restorative environments theory posits that certain aspects of natural environments are implicated in the restorative effects on people who suffer from directed attention fatigue. In other words, immersion in natural environments with specific characteristics helps individuals whose task concentration is compromised by the demands of life in urban settings. The characteristics are: (1) the restorative setting must be away from distractions and demands on directed attention; (2) the person must be "fascinated" by environmental contents; (3) the person should experience the environment as "coherent" and of substantial extent; and (4) there must be compatibility between environmental demands, the person's inclinations and environmental supports for the intended activities. A fifth factor, familiarity with the surroundings and/or activity, is also implied.

For 10 years, the Kaplans followed 27 groups through the 9-14 day Outward Bound wilderness program and found that after completing the course, participants reported experiencing a sense of peace, wholeness and the ability to think more clearly. In another study, they interviewed more than 1200 corporate employees from various companies and state agencies and found that office workers with a window view of nature—trees, bushes or even a large lawn—experienced significantly less frustration and more enthusiasm for their jobs than those workers without windows.

The Kaplans' work is significant because they conducted systematic studies that confirm and expand on what many of us know intuitively—that there are consequences when human beings remove themselves from the natural world in which our evolution as a species has been embedded. Will Adams (2005) described it as a dissociative relationship, which may explain the rise in conditions such as attention deficit disorder (ADD) and the everyday stress and tension that many of us suffer. I think the Kaplans' work may also be useful in explicating the relationship between group intelligence and transformation and settings immersed in nature.

Moving deeper into the realm of objective scientific research into the study of the effect of place, space and environment on human beings, we encounter the empirical approaches of Roger Ulrich, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Michael Persinger, Roger Barker, and Stephen Suomi. Roger Ulrich, like the Kaplans, contributed to restorative environments theory but from the perspective of psychophysiological aspects of person-environment relations. He measured the emotional (affective) response of human beings to nature and natural settings by examining their neurological activity (1983). Ulrich focused attention on the biological response of human beings to the aesthetic (visual) experience of nature. His assumption was that *humans are biologically programmed for pre-cognitive response to stimuli that would have been found in the natural settings where human evolution took place*. In other words, before we can even think about our

reaction to a particular natural setting, we have a “gut” (emotional) like-dislike response that is instinctual and coded to our evolutionary development in nature. That is why, according to Ulrich, nature provides restorative experiences for people who may normally be deprived of such stimuli, such as city-dwellers.

One of Ulrich’s famous experiments was a 10-year study of hospital patients in rooms with a view of trees and their accelerated recovery compared to a group of patients without a view of natural elements. In his studies, Ulrich found the following eight factors that appear in natural settings and contribute to emotional response in humans:

- Complexity and number of perceived elements,
- Structure of order,
- Focality,
- Depth or spaciousness,
- Quality of ground surface textures,
- Presence of threat,
- Presence of a deflected vista,
- Water, and
- Presence of vegetation.

Other empirical studies have examined the effect of environmental stimulation on human behavior. Michael Persinger, a professor of psychology and neuroscience, investigated the effects of “extraordinary environments” on the human nervous system. He discovered that geophysical activity associated with specific places accounted for altered consciousness in human beings as does the interaction between novel or unusual settings and human chemical activity (e.g., adrenaline bursts). Persinger (1985) also examined electromagnetic (EM) effects on human beings, which might account, for example, for the effect of sound and vibration (and music) on human well-being and learning. These vibrations may also account for why we feel different on the top of a mountain, for example, where EM fields are different from those in a valley or on a noisy city street.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) researched (and named) “flow” experiences, those times when we are absolutely lost in whatever we are doing without regard to time passing or other distractions. He found that such flow experiences occurred most often when there was an optimal balance of stimulation in the form of demands and challenges from tasks in a person’s environment. Optimal life experiences, he found, occurred when humans experience just the right amount of challenge or demand from what they are doing rather than too much or too little.

Roger Barker and Stephen Suomi identified two other factors implicated in the relationship between individuals and their environments. Barker (1968) found that his participants' settings were more influential in determining their behavior than their personalities. Calling his field of inquiry "psychological ecology," Barker studied people in all kinds of settings—shops, playing fields, offices, churches, etc.—and posited that individuals and their inanimate surroundings together create systems of a higher order that take on a life of their own. When we enter a "behavior setting," everything in that environment encourages us to maintain the status quo, so we become part of that system more completely than we maintain our unique and self-contained personality and behavioral characteristics.

Conversely, Suomi (1991), building on his research with young primates at the National Institutes of Health, determined that individual preference for familiarity or novelty—two environmental conditions—determines behavior and potential for growth and development. To interpret the effect of an environment, he said, one must consider the reactions of different individuals with their different genetic and experiential backgrounds, not only characteristics of the setting itself. Some people, for example, prefer familiar places, like home, and perform best there, whereas others prefer mystery and a sensation of possible danger and behave optimally in those settings. For still others, a combination of the two may be ideal.

Before concluding my brief overview of the literature on the effect of place, space and environment on human beings, I want to mention the work of Will W. Adams (2007) of Duquesne University. Drawing from the philosophical works of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Adams believed that mankind's problems, from conflict and war to our ecological crisis, are a result of our false belief that we are separate from nature and from one another. Such dualistic thinking, he said, explains our I-It relationship with the non-human natural world and with each other and our proclivity to "use" the other to our advantage. Rather, according to Adams, we must realize that we always already exist in an inseparable, intimate relationship with nature as an authentic other (I-Thou) and that we ourselves are one way nature manifests itself. When we make this shift in thinking, our relationship to all others—plant, animal, element, human—will also shift.

Adams (2007) proposed that even the way we study the topic reviewed in this paper requires a non-dualistic approach. The phenomenological method of research pioneered by Merleau-Ponty and others offers such a way because it taps into the direct and immediate experiences of people with their environment. Assuming the "inherence of the self in the world and of the world in the self; of the self in the other and the other in the self" (p. 43), we are the best articulators of the effect of place, space and environment because we are an intimate part of it.

Abram (1996) conveyed our essential interrelationality with kindred beings and presences in nature this way:

Humans are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils—all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of others. The landscape of shadowed voices, these feathered bodies and antlers and tumbling streams—these breathing shapes are our family, the beings with whom we are engaged, with whom we struggle and suffer and celebrate. (p. ix)

Because our focus in the pilot study on the powers of place (described next) is inherently relational—asking how surroundings affect collective transformation—a phenomenological approach is warranted. Building on the wisdom of the researchers, thinkers and practitioners mentioned above, we hope to identify patterns, elements and characteristics of places, spaces and environments that contribute to a shift in collective consciousness toward right action in the world. We do this by tapping into the direct experience of an array of informed individuals, keeping in mind Merleau-Ponty's assumption: "We and the world are one another" (p. 206).

METHOD

Approach

I believe that the surroundings in which human experiences occur play an active role in the experiences themselves. Although we may know this intuitively, little systematic research has been conducted to identify specific aspects that affect shifts: What are the individual influential elements, what does it feel like to the person, and what effect do these elements have on the fulfillment of a group's goals? For those whose interest or work involves gathering people to affect positive change in the world, deeper and broader knowledge about a setting's ability to support or inhibit the purpose of the group and the experience of participants is helpful. Of particular interest and inspiring the current study is a recent and compelling question: How do setting and environment enable collective transformation – the insight, sense of communion, clarity and inspiration necessary for action that makes a difference? The approach taken for this inquiry includes the assumption that such knowledge already resides in individuals who do this work and that these people are untapped sources of intelligence about the places they have inhabited.

This inquiry began in response to the leadership of Tom Callanan of the Fetzer Institute (www.fetzer.org), a philanthropic organization dedicated to and practiced in convening groups, supporting dialogue, reflection, collective insight and inspired action in the world. In the fall of 2007 Tom Callanan, along with Sheryl Erickson of the Collective Wisdom Initiative (<http://www.collectivewisdominitiative.org/>) and I, with my research, *Group Magic* (Levi, 2003) and The Resonance Project (www.resonanceproject.org), joined to undertake an inquiry broadly identified as The Powers of Place. The scope of this larger inquiry was to begin with a small pilot study with the goal of uncovering and beginning to articulate some of the experience of place, space and environment related to collective transformation, collective intention and outcome. The research to follow is a pilot study conducted as part of the initial exploratory research. It should be considered a small scale probe with findings and interpretations that point to and enable potential future research as well as active experiments.

We began this research by identifying people associated with the Collective Wisdom Initiative and/or with the Fetzer Institute with considerable experience as facilitators, conveners and mediators, along with founders, owners and directors/staff of meeting places and retreat centers recommended to us as transformational meeting places. I interviewed a small group of these people in depth to uncover sometimes hidden (even to

them) knowledge based on one or two exceptional group encounters they had experienced. We also identified special places in which these people had worked and obtained detailed descriptions of them.

Although we were searching for settings in which collective transformation occurs, because of my own interest in groups and group processes and because this project is an outgrowth of the Collective Wisdom Initiative, stories of individual transformation are included as well. We believe that individual and collective transformation are intimately interconnected. In *Group Magic* (2003), I found that when people described experiences of collective resonance, they nearly always reported that they were personally changed in the process. When shifts occurred in groups, people reported that concurrent shifts occurred in their personal perspectives, behavior and participation in their external worlds.

The relationship between individual and collective transformation informed this study as well. My choice of personal interview as a method for gathering data was based on an assumption that even for experiences in which an entire group of people is reported to have shifted in its outlook, knowledge or way of being together, the reports necessarily come from individuals, filtered by their own backgrounds, perspectives, personalities, abilities and goals. Even when members of a group are interviewed together, again, each person can only speak from personal experience.

Scope

I conducted eight in-depth interviews for this study. The settings described as context by interviewees and names of interviewees are listed in the Participants and Settings subsection below. Interviews were one to two hours in duration and were conducted by telephone and audiotaped. Two interviewees who have worked as group conveners for many years took a broader perspective and described features from various settings in which they have worked. The rest focused on one or two settings in which a particularly powerful experience had occurred for them. Although it also would have been informative to interview more or all members of a group reported to have undergone transformation in a particular setting, it was not possible because of the limited scope of this study as an initial exploration into this phenomenon.

Interviewees worked as facilitators, conveners of groups and conflict-resolution professionals, owners/founders or directors/staff of retreat centers in U.S. and non-U.S. locations. Participants included five men and three women.

The purpose of this study is to provide readers with insights about how place, space and environment influence collective transformation. Most of these insights come directly from the study participants (Findings), but I offer my own interpretation in a separate

section by that name. This is a pilot study, a first glimpse of knowledge of this phenomenon through the lens of lived experience. It is not meant to be definitive, only to surface and name phenomena that exist and may be below the radar of conscious knowledge at this point in time. This study is meant to make the implicit explicit, generate rich dialogue, and point to further directions for inquiry and practice.

Rationale

Although this study is an early effort that focuses on the powers of place to influence group transformation, it is important to put the work in a larger context of eight years of prior study, practice and research supported by the Fetzer Institute, and the Collective Wisdom Initiative (CWI). The conversations, gatherings and writing that led up to creation of a CWI website, and publication of a book, *Centered on the Edge: Mapping a Field of Collective and Spiritual Wisdom* (Briskin et al., 2001), introduced many themes and questions that have informed ensuing research. *Group Magic*, my doctoral research into experiences of collective resonance, was also funded by the Fetzer Institute through the CWI and completed in 2003. It led, as well, to an organization (The Resonance Project) and related website designed to post stories and practices of collective resonance, reference related articles and encourage further research into the phenomenon. In addition, many ongoing projects of all kinds seek to understand and expand knowledge and experience about ways people think and work together toward right action in the world. The current study on the powers of place takes one theme or pattern that emerged from both studies: the effect of place, space and environment on group experience. This study has been designed to broaden and deepen the inquiry.

Choice of Method

This inquiry was conducted using a phenomenological approach to human science. Phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover the meaning of lived experience. It is based on the belief that objective understanding is mediated by subjective experience of the phenomenon and that human experience is an inherent structural property of the experience itself. The word *phenomenon* comes from the Greek *phaenesthai*, which means to flare up, to show itself, to appear.

I used personal interviews, conducted by telephone, and designed the questions to elicit the interviewee's full experience of a setting in which collective transformation reportedly occurred. The questions were open-ended to follow the thread of an interviewee's thoughts and feelings and tap into deeper levels of experiential knowledge that underlie more cursory descriptions.

Participants and Settings

The study interviewees and the settings they described as context for their chosen transformational experience are listed below. These persons were selected for this early inquiry based on extent of their knowledge and years of prior experience related to this topic. They were also selected based on their interest in collective transformation and their perceived sensitivity to the potential role of place, space and environment as influencers.

Interviewees

David Brand
Tom Callanan
Thais Corral
Sheryl Erickson

Mark Gerzon
Mark Nepo
Stephanie Ryan
William Ury

Settings as Context

Institute of Noetic Sciences, Petaluma, California
Whidbey Institute, Whidbey Island, Washington
Seasons at Fetzer Institute, Kalamazoo, Michigan
Vista Alegre, Santo Antonio, Brazil
Mohonk Mountain House, New Paltz, New York
Gold Lake Resort, Gold Lake, Colorado
The Abraham Path, Middle East

Researcher

As primary researcher, I have been involved in the organizational systems arena for more than 18 years as consultant, facilitator and researcher. I have a Ph.D. in organizational systems. My interest in place stems from a finding in my doctoral research that place and space play an important role in a group's shift into collective resonance. I am also intuitively aware of how different settings make me feel and have become more practiced over time in designing my personal spaces—home, office—to reflect my preferences and support my intentions.

My work in the Fetzer Institute-supported Powers of Place inquiry has been in partnership with Tom Callanan and Sheryl Erickson. My role as researcher in this pilot study was closely supported by Sheryl Erickson, who has been a partner in identifying interviewees, reading of transcripts, analysis of data, interpretation and writing of the final document.

Data Analysis

The themes that emerged from the interview data resulted from my personal interaction with it. Each transcript was read and reread multiple times with notations identifying the messages that I felt were being communicated relative to the topic and to initial key questions underlying the research. I also listened to all of the audio recordings to note qualities of meaning such as tone of voice, volume and pacing and rhythm of speech (indicating levels of engagement and enthusiasm). From this review of all of the transcripts and relistening to audio recordings, groupings and categories of experience formed across the interviews and became the findings of the research. Some themes were more frequently mentioned across participants, but I included most of what was identified because the goal of this study was to make visible as broad a spectrum of knowledge and experience as possible so that later work has a larger palette of ideas from which to choose. Themes were likewise analyzed to reveal larger patterns that might also inform future directions in research and practical application.

Funding

This study was funded by the Fetzer Institute as a pilot study, taking place over a period of six months, and part of a larger exploration investigating the powers of place as they relate to collective transformational experience.

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the study—the themes and patterns that emerged from my interviews. Taken together, they offer the beginnings of a map of lived experience in response to the question, “What effect does place, space and environment have on collective transformation?” They provide pointers to specific elements that were mentioned repeatedly (though perhaps in different ways) in descriptions of places where individual and collective shifts occurred. A visual graphic is included and for each theme I provide a narrative description as well as direct quotes that illustrate and expand on the theme.

I believe that all reported aspects of experience are important and valid. I include, therefore, not only themes mentioned by all or a majority of interviewees, but those that were only mentioned once or twice because, like stars in a night sky where some are smaller than others to the naked eye, that fact does not mean that they are weaker, only, perhaps, farther away and more difficult for us to perceive. Also, because this inquiry is a beginning exploration of a rich field of wisdom, I believe it is important to include all of what is learned so we have a more comprehensive map from which to chart a future course.

As my interviews progressed, I became increasingly aware that when people referred to *place*, they were describing more than one level of experience. Some spoke of place as a room, some in terms of the land on which they were situated. Others described the place as a particular setting during a three-day retreat, such as a circle of people sitting in an outdoor tent. Some referred to their own bodies as a place, one mentioning that his body was the vehicle for his spirit to connect with the earth. Within the body, the heart was also mentioned more than once as a place for holding something or someone. Most interviewees simultaneously spoke about several different levels of place during the conversation. People also referred to space on many levels. In addition to physical dimensions of space, participants mentioned time as a spatial element in terms of having enough of it during a gathering to feel a sense of spaciousness. This resulted in enhanced relationships between people, time for personal and group processing when difficult issues were encountered, and a rhythm established during a three-day retreat, for example, that held and supported the group’s transformation.

During the interviews, many techniques and activities were mentioned that described facilitation practices or group process design. I attempted, for this study, to distinguish

between those and elements directly related to place, space or environment. This was not easy because these things are interrelated and dynamic, but for purposes of this study, I tried to remain aware of the distinctions. I also attempted to maintain a focus on the effect of place, space and environment on *group* rather than individual transformation. These two things are intimately connected, as mentioned in the Introduction section of this paper, but this inquiry is intended to deepen and broaden our knowledge in the arena of *collective* wisdom, the field of inquiry from which it was generated.

In this section, I report on the findings as information I gathered and analyzed in the course of this study. I have not attempted here to reflect upon or make meaning of the data, which is presented in a subsequent section (Interpretation). It is important to approach the data this way to allow readers an opportunity simply to hear what was said and to begin to make meaning for themselves before I offer my interpretation.

The seven descriptors below illuminate aspects of place, space and environment that were mentioned as playing a part in collective transformation:

- Geography and Natural Environment
- Design, Configuration and Contents of Space
- Aesthetics and Beauty
- History, Meaning and Intention
- Energy Accumulation
- Connection to Larger Wholes
- Love, Respect, Reciprocity

Figure 2, below, depicts the visible and invisible powers of place.

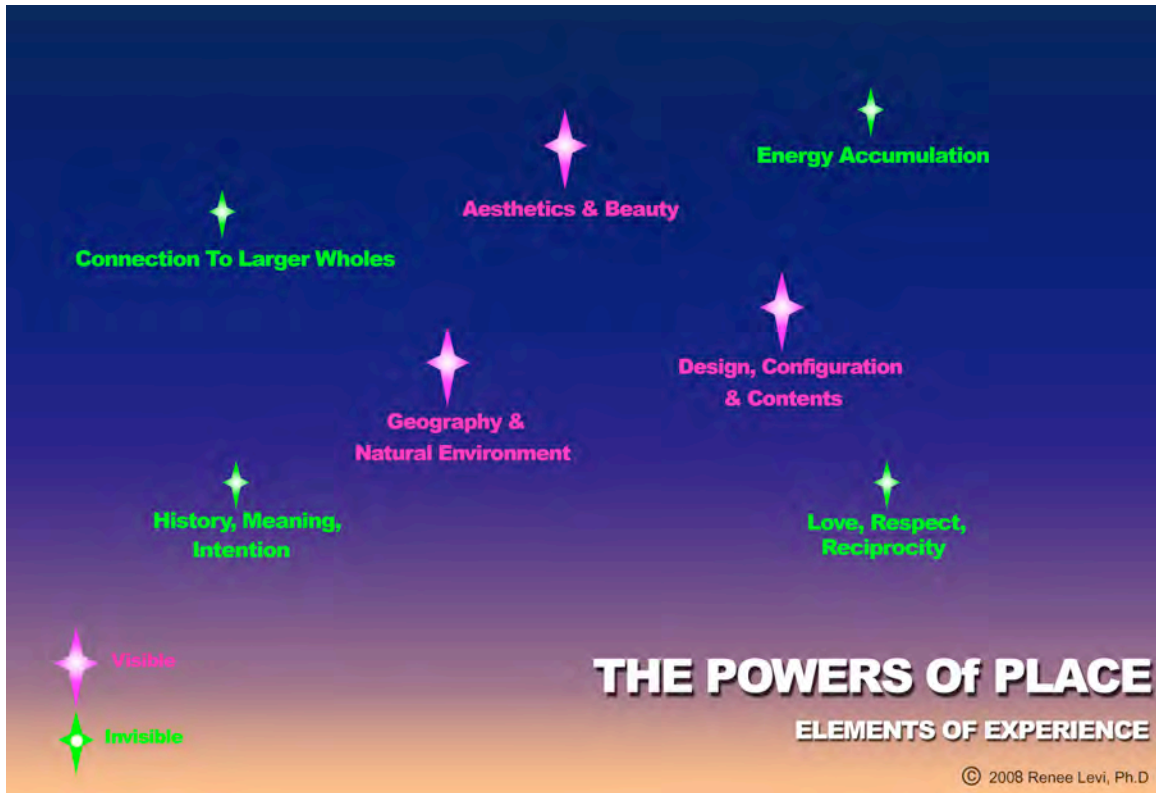


Figure 2. The Elements of Experience in the Powers of Place.

Influence of Geography and Natural Environment

Everyone I interviewed mentioned the natural environment and specific elements of nature as significant to their experiences of collective transformation. Indirectly, they spoke of the significance of geographic setting as context for their transformational experience, that is, meetings in high mountains or rolling hills, on an island, in a valley, in the desert or near bodies of water such as a lake or stream.

All of the experiences described occurred in nature-rich settings (vs. urban ones), and were, in most cases, specifically chosen by the interviewee for the gathering. As noted by several study participants, group magic can and does happen in all kinds of settings, not just beautiful natural ones; there is, however, general agreement that there are fewer barriers to overcome by facilitation skill and process design, for example, in environments that support the intention and transformational processes of a group.

In addition to natural settings providing a surround for quiet, relaxation and a slower pace conducive to reflection, natural environments also offer full sensual, not just

Participants in extraordinary group experiences noticed smells, sounds, temperature, texture, and even taste (of delicious and healthy foods).

intellectual, engagement. The importance of movement such as walking on the land, either as a break from indoor activities or as an activity with a purpose in itself, was also mentioned as a significant influence on transformational experience.

Animals were mentioned in several interviews. In one, dolphins jumping in the water on the ferry ride to the retreat center served to create a sense of being welcomed for participants arriving for an important dialogue. In another, certain animals showing up at significant times in the group's (or individual's) process served as signs or synchronicities. Also, the availability for engagement with animals, such as the opportunity to interact with or ride horses, promoted risk-taking and the possibility for creative opening, according to another study participant.

Every time we went across to the island, we saw whales. Now, I don't know how many times people see them, but we always imagined that they were somehow part of the welcoming party.

Mountains, rolling hills, lakes, rivers, oceans, forests, islands, and deserts all formed the backdrop for the experiences described in this study. Specific elements of nature that were mentioned were fog, wind, rain, snow, and trees. Sometimes these elements were linked to the group's own process; for example, a misty and rainy day felt like a reflection of sadness or grief being experienced by a group member or the group as a whole. Trees were often mentioned in the context of the approach to the place (e.g., a tree-lined entryway to the retreat center); for their size, which lent perspective to the human experience; and as a source of wisdom when one participant asked a large, ancient oak tree for guidance and support for her role in grounding the group. Snow was mentioned by one person as holding the group hostage in an alpine setting, thus amplifying the collective shift.

Putting my back to the oak is saying, "I'm open to your strength and to my strength." I trust that this is bigger than mine to do. If there is a way of doing this work together, then I'm of service.

✕

We were snowed into the lodge for four days. There was no going out, and people who might have had second thoughts about being in the same room with other people there were fellow hostages of the weather. It reminds you of your common humanity. It also puts your common humanity in a larger context, in this case, nature. There were some invocations of a larger spirit that bonds us all.

In addition to environmental factors, the elements of fire and water bear special mention in these findings because they were mentioned frequently and in a variety of forms.

Fireplaces, campfires and candles were often elements of the environments in which people gathered. Fireplaces were described as symbols of home and hearth, warmth and comfort, and places in which a unique kind of coming together could take place. Several participants spoke of the experience of two or more people gazing at a fire together; the intimacy of the experience without conversation and the connection to

When asked to elaborate on the magic of fire itself, study participants spoke of its movement, its dynamic quality and its aliveness. One also mentioned that fire, to her, symbolized calm, relaxation and comfort and simultaneously, danger. This combination of qualities made fire an important element of extraordinary group experiences.

something beyond the immediate surroundings, a “sense of a non-human presence.” Fire, in the form of a candle in the center of a circle of people, was given symbolic meaning by one interviewee in that the presence of fire reminds human beings of, and connects them with, their lineage and role as fire-bearers, bringing light to the world in stories of old.

Water, too, was mentioned often, both in tangible and symbolic ways. Interestingly, the same paradoxical qualities held by fire for one interviewee also appeared in her relationship to water: dynamism, calm, and comfort as well as danger. Water in a setting inspired awe in the power of a waterfall; the enormous size of an alpine lake; the mist and fog enveloping a warm, cozy building; and sounds of running water as background to group activities. One woman included water as part of the facilitation design, asking participants to bring water from their place of residence, ritually mingling the waters and eventually returning it to the roots of an old tree on the property.

Influence of Design, Configuration and Contents of Space

Most of the participants in this study mentioned specific elements they noticed that were part of, and directly influenced, their transformational group experience. These began to appear as patterns or configurations of space that influenced the collective experience. A few examples are listed below.

- *Size of the meeting place relative to the size of the group gathered:* Most interviewees believe that the absolute size is not important, but that the room should be a good fit for the size of the group. In one case, a tightly packed room contributed to the cohesiveness of the group because of the physical proximity of people. Most of the interviewees had participated in group activities in which the room was too large and felt it was harder to establish the dynamics they sought. One woman pointed to the high ceilings in a room as essential for holding the vibrant energy of a particular gathering.

- *Shape of the room relative to its purpose:* Round rooms and tents were mentioned several times as spaces that echoed the shape of the circle of people gathered within, providing a context for non-hierarchical types of group activities (e.g., dialogue).
- *Availability of public and private places in the same setting:* Private alcoves, cozy seating areas, small breakout rooms and spaces for individual relaxation and reflection—as well as larger, more public gathering spaces—were mentioned repeatedly in interviews as essential to the inner and outer work required for collective transformation.

The space is open: there are windows all on one side and four breakout rooms. Even when not used, these four rooms are like the four directions. They serve as some kind of poles of energy for the larger room.
- *Places for sitting or walking side by side rather than facing one another:* Examples were rocking chairs next to each other on a porch overlooking a beautiful, natural panorama; walking paths wide enough to accommodate two or more people; and benches sprinkled around the property for opportunities to reflect or relate in nature.
- *Open interior spaces:* These were mentioned in the context of providing sufficient space for physical activities, either as a group or individuals (e.g., yoga, dancing).
- *Welcoming or approach elements of the facility:* These signaled intent for the gathering and were important influencers of what transpired in the gathering later, said several study participants. Specific examples were displayed flags from guests’ native countries, long and winding tree-line entrance roads that allowed people to “settle in” to the new environment and guardhouses manned with people who greeted guests by name and welcomed them onto the property.
- *Windows with views of nature:* These provided groups with expanded perspective and awareness, and a sense of being held by a larger container than the room or facility itself.
- *Natural construction materials:* Participants mentioned the impact of the built environment using natural materials such as wood or stone.
- *Working fireplaces or wood stoves:* These serve as focal points or efforts to bring natural elements into rooms and buildings.
- *Elements that remind people of home:* Mentions included a kitchen with whistling teapot; a small, modest front door even if the facility was expansive; and photos of family members of the place’s original owners on the walls.
- *Food that was fresh and healthy or native to the place:* Healthy food helps individuals feel good and think together better, said one person, and food native to

the area suggests another dimension of connection to the place where the gathering is held. Eating fresh salmon in Washington state, she said, made her feel more like she was inhabiting the place itself.

- *Location distant from people's daily lives:* Several participants mentioned that a sense of being away, of being private (as a group) or of not really knowing where they were contributed to group shift. One went on to say that in such settings, a “temporary community” is formed that may be very different from a person’s established social network.
- *Opportunities for exploration and challenge:* The chance to stretch oneself (horseback riding, water activities, hiking) contributed to guests’ willingness to be open and creative in the gathering.
- *Symbols contained in the space and called upon to invoke meaning for the participants:* In one gathering where the topic was money and philanthropy, a seed corn was used to signify abundance. In another, a nurse log (a decaying log in which new organisms grow), brought in from outside, symbolized rebirth and renewal, something occurring in the way the group itself functioned. Symbols were also used for ritual blessing of the space, invocation of spirit(s) and clearing.

Aesthetics and Beauty

Study participants spoke of aesthetics and beauty when describing aspects of place, space and environment. Geography and natural elements were frequently mentioned as well as man-made objects in the space such as art, artifacts and overall architectural design and layout.

Some spoke of the inclusion of such elements as simply pleasurable, and others linked beauty to awe, such as the feeling of looking at a waterfall that held a prominent place in one setting, and in another, the possibility of elevated consciousness and connection when two people lifted their gaze during a meeting to the glacial lake and forests framed by the windows of the room. For a third person, natural beauty, when deeply appreciated, became a portal to healing, an important aspect, to her, of both individual and collective transformation.

The awareness of the windows and the light and being able to see out at nature in the distance brought a lot of metaphorical images. We’re part of this larger schema. We are connected with it and with part of a larger design. We’re not just little units here standing in isolation. If I lift my thoughts to the forest or the deep glacial lake, someone else may do the same thing and meet me there.

One participant spoke of beauty in terms of simplicity and elegance. She described how she purposely keeps the interior spaces sparse because “it allows for people to fill up the space with themselves”.

The place is already there, eternal and enduring. We are passing through.

History, Meaning and Intent

All of the study's interviewees explicitly recognized that symbolic meaning of the history of a place and the intention infusing its creation and use impacted group outcomes.

In several of the experiences described to me, the history of the land and the spirit that informed its use were directly linked to the purpose of the contemporary gathering. In one setting designed as a place where people with differing opinions come together to work out mutual solutions, the history of the land being “a place where warring tribes would put down their weapons and vision about the future and tell stories about the past” was significant. This person believed that bringing this history to the conscious attention of the gathered group not only arouses curiosity and engagement with the land early in the group's time together but also establishes a subtle set of ground rules about the type of behavior expected there. Another interviewee described how, during a gathering in which discussions of money and philanthropy raised difficult emotions, the Native American potlatch spirit could have been invoked to offer an alternative approach to currency. The alternative idea is that of “gifting” and the gift economy in which currency gains value by moving and being exchanged rather than by being saved and hoarded. In retrospect, this person reflected, “We could have taken [the discussion] to another level and experienced the story [of the potlatch spirit and gifting] that the land was still reverberating with.”

Awareness of ancestors and our connection to them through places and spaces emerged in various forms. In one setting, old black-and white-photos adorned the rooms of a large, historic mansion in which people gathered for dialogue and exploration of different ways of coming together to access collective wisdom. The photos depicted people from different time periods gathered to consider the needs and problems of the day in the same room in which the current guests assembled. “Knowing that,” she said, “seeing the pictures, I felt the history of important conversations that must have taken place there. It felt like it was supporting what we were doing.” Another study participant involved with rebuilding a walking path to encourage mutual understanding in the Middle East, described how not only is the symbolic presence of biblical Abraham, the father of many modern religions, important to this effort, so too are the spirits of ensuing generations of people who walked the path.

Ancestors need not be ancient, either. In one retreat center, a connection to former guests is created by reading and writing in a journal placed in every guest's room. Each person who stays there is asked to leave some reflection or

We're recognizing a path, something that is already there. It's been there for 4000 years. We're not creating it; we're recognizing it. We're dusting off a few footsteps.

feeling or whatever they want to write. Everyone who stays there goes through the journals and adds to them. “It has created a lineage,” said one of my study’s participants.

A history of neutrality and inspiration associated with a particular place were also mentioned as significant to potential for transformational experience in groups. An interviewee who had spent a career in conflict resolution pointed out that when the conflict runs deep, the setting of a meeting place that has a history of being neutral may be a suitable choice for gatherings in which both sides are involved. It is important to bring both sides out of their social networks, he stated, to focus on common goals. He further said that not only buildings and their surrounding land can symbolize neutrality; so too can countries that are now peaceful but where in ages past ethnic tensions or even violent conflicts occurred. He cited Switzerland and Belgium as examples.

We did some work with Russian and Chechen leaders and we met in the Peace Palace in The Hague. You look for places that are evocative, places that remind people of what’s possible.

Finally, some places directly embody their history of social change and link it to their current focus. Whidbey Institute in Washington, for example, was one of the original homes of the environmental movement and to this day offers itself for conversations and activities related to that topic. What happened there before, said one study participant, imbues and informs the work that is being done there now, with the natural setting as backdrop and reminder of the reason for the gathering. The location has thus become a symbol for an entire movement.

Energy Accumulation in a Place or Space

Every group leaves a little bit of its collective presence in the center of that circle.

A large number of participants believed that energy or energetic fields build in a place or space over time from prior transformational experiences, individual or collective, and that this energy provides a kind of “jump start” to the possibility of transformation in the future.

Initially I included my interviewees’ mention of a place or space accumulating energy over time, and affecting subsequent group gatherings, in the above theme related to history, meaning and intention. The closer I looked at the data, however, the more I discerned a difference in what interviewees described. I also began to ask more specifically for the distinction in later interviews. History and meaning are cognitive constructs. What these people seemed to note was physical, vibrational, energetic. This is not to suggest that there is no connection between history and energetic fields, rather

I can feel that every time a group goes in there; they start off, and it’s palpable. Not even knowing the history, people will remark that there is something different they feel about this space.

that they can be distinct, one having more to do with thinking and the other to do with feeling. In fact, one participant acknowledged in stating, “The energy of the history and intention is held in the land now.” A large number of participants—six out of eight—believed that energy or energetic fields build in a place or space over time from prior transformational experiences, individual or collective, and that this energy amplifies the possibility of transformation in the future.

Describing a retreat center in California, one participant suggested that when groups gather to discuss emotionally sensitive and difficult issues such as money or race, being in a place where there has been a lot of work around conscious awareness of hidden issues is an advantage to the group.

They really do work around consciousness there. Everything that’s gone before you has been working that territory. If you have to take an issue that’s a challenge around the edge of consciousness, that’s a great place to go.

Another participant described a personal sensing of energy fields at the head of the Ganges River in India while on a family vacation there.

There is the beauty of the Ganges, but also the fact that people have had an elevated sense of consciousness and expanded sense of awareness that endows the place.

This man, while asserting that he had no tangible evidence of energy fields, admitted to feeling them in different places, like the one he described above.

One woman spoke of the power of history and its influence on current proceedings in terms of “ancestral fields” that are present and evident over time. She said that at a retreat center in California, the founder’s original intent for consciousness and peace was so strong that this field of awareness continued to surround and inform the gatherings that have occurred there long after the founder passed. She spoke of a felt-sense of this energetic field and what she believed was the possibility of an individual and/or a group accessing this field of the founder’s intent.

I can't imagine that the founder's ancestral field isn't around that place. If you were to ask him to partner with you, things would shift.

Another participant discerned the difference between individual and collective energy in places and suggested that certain places are built or intended for one or the other. He described how, in India and Bali, he experienced Hindu temples differently. Indian temples, he said, are intended for personal prayer and meditation. On the other hand, he pointed out that the Balinese culture is community-based and collectively oriented so that their spirituality and temples are all about collective energy.

When the collective is not present, the energy is not present. It's not a place where people go to pray or meditate.

I had spent a good deal of time in India and loved the Hindu temples there. You can go into these temples, and they are places where you can fall into meditation in nothing flat. When I went to Bali, I was anticipating having the same experience in their Hindu temples, but when I went into them, it was like they were dead. The energy was flat. It wasn't that tingling, alive, vital feeling, and I was very confused by that. Then I returned to the Bali temples when there was a dance or ceremony going on and the place was lit up! The energy present was electric.

This intent for the collective and the hundreds of groups that have met and been changed by participating in a gathering at Seasons, Fetzer Institute's retreat and renewal center in Kalamazoo, has made it over time a "spiritual power spot," said one of the study's interviewees.

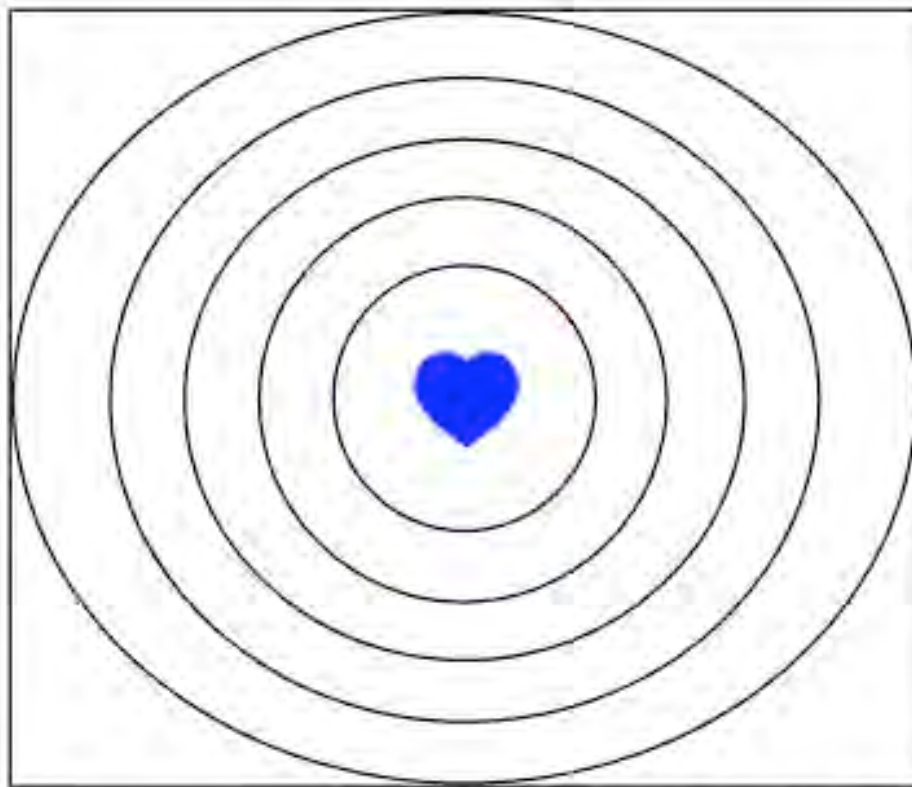
Every group, regardless of the language they speak, regardless of the way of knowing they embrace, every group gets a jump start in their authentic conversation by being in that [main meeting] room.

In addition to the previous authentic conversations held there, he attributed the energy accumulation in this main meeting space to regular use of ritual. It is common for groups that convene meetings at Seasons to end their time with a ritual that invites people to put something of themselves and their group into the space for the next guests. These rituals vary according to the type of group, style of facilitation and/or reasons for gathering, but the consistent pattern is that every person and group "gives back to the space" when departing by adding something to honor or support the positive energy field that will reside over time in the space.

Awareness of Connection to Larger Wholes

Our relationship to each other and the whole was always about relationship to successively larger wholes. If each individual is a place, we were all places in relation to each other and the place we were in and to successively larger places.

At first these different references seemed scattered, but as I listened more deeply, I became aware of a pattern emerging. The participants' descriptions of place formed a nesting image in my mind, like concentric circles (see Figure 3), where one place was held by a larger place that was held by a still larger place and so on.



Connection to Larger Wholes

Figure 3. Connection to Larger Wholes.

I named this image “connection to larger wholes” because what I began to see was that my interviewees were very aware that people and places are always connected to larger groups of people or places—or the unknown—and, indeed, that this very awareness is an integral part of the possibility of personal or collective transformation. Connection with larger and larger wholes is reflected in the environment and often named in association with observable features of the physical setting: nature holding the tent, the tent holding the group, the group holding two people with opposing points of view and the hearts of all the individuals in a group holding it all. Another sense of connection to larger wholes appeared as descriptions of time and silence as if spatial features of a place: spaciousness of time and calling for a moment of silence allowed individuals and the group to listen internally—to an interior space—for its potential of inner knowing that might inform the group.

When we step into a place, we are inhabiting an existing set of relationships and connections. Our job is to inhabit those connections.

One interviewee described having facilitated a gathering at a beautiful retreat center in the high mountains of Colorado where members of two opposing American political parties had been brought together around a controversial subject to establish common ground for moving forward. He described to me the moments in time when he felt a collective transformation, when the group consciousness seemed to shift into a sense of cohesion, communion and deeper understanding. This was a critical moment in the meeting that could easily have moved to polarization and a serious split within the group. This moment occurred when two men spoke their opposite views with such force and deep emotion—sitting directly opposite one another in the large circle—that no one knew what to do next. My interviewee, as facilitator, not knowing what to do himself, asked the group to take a minute of silence and to see whether each person could “hold both of these two beautiful men in their hearts at the same time.” He described in detail what that minute felt like to him and the transformation that he felt there and then: the realization in the group of common ground, common goals and an experience of successfully holding a very energized paradox. The conveners had hoped for this effect, which indeed had been their intent for convening the meeting. What did this particular retreat place, its history as a meeting place of indigenous tribes, gathering in a tent in the context of high mountains, have to do with the group’s realization and new awareness?

We have all these concentric circles. Nature holding the tent, the tent holding the circle of diverse people, the circle holding the two men, each of us in our own body holding our own energy, and then our hearts holding the opposing forces—and silence and time holding them all.

Another interviewee spoke of a gathering at a retreat center at an institute located on an island. This institute had been and continues to be central to environmental thinking and action. He described the people who care for the institute (the owners, managers and staff) as part of an organism called the *institute*, which he saw as part of a still larger organism called the *institute community*, which itself includes people who came there regularly to volunteer or just walk on the beautiful land. He experienced the institute community, as part of a yet larger encompassing organism of *the island*, which was invisibly connected to others around the world who were involved with the same kind of work. To me, this interviewee’s description echoed the pattern of concentric circles and connections to larger wholes that I heard across the interviews.

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of the relationship of guests with staff and described the principles of people as integral to the influential power of a place. They emphasized that staff can serve to bind the retreat center or facility to the larger whole of the community within which it is embedded. They commented that staff—administrative

and kitchen staff, guest services workers, grounds maintenance crews, and so on—can embody the values of the place and surrounding community and that their reciprocating relationships of respect and connection with guests affects the possibility of transformational outcomes. In terms of connection to larger wholes, the staff of a meeting place can bridge the facility with the ongoing life of the larger community because they live and work in that location. Such a connection contributes to a felt-sense of coherence of people, place and environment.

How we treat people, the people who are involved in the work of that place, should reflect the kind of humanity we want to see in the place, how it spreads in all the relations. Some places are beautiful, but the people [who work] there are completely disconnected [from it]. The employees may not even know what is happening there. All of that transpires energetically on the place. People who come there feel it even if they can't articulate it consciously. They feel when something is coherent.

Another way in which interviewees conveyed their concept of place as larger than a particular physical place and connected to larger images was in their use of the place's name to connote other things, such as a way of working together or a symbol of something extraordinary and possible. They spoke, for example, of a group of people involved in a gathering, the place itself and the project on which they were working as becoming one and the same thing, then gave it a name anchored to the place. A few specific examples of the name of a place anchoring larger experiences were: an ideal way of working together on future projects was referenced as "the Whidbey way," a particular meeting resulting in profound and touching insights was referenced as "the Mohonk gathering" and a moving and evolving reconciliation was referenced as "walking Abraham's path."

We have a relationship or friendship with a place and the whole as much as we do other living things.

Love, Respect and Reciprocity

Several aspects of the relationship between people and place emerged during my interviews. The first is that there *is* a relationship: people consider the place as a viable entity in its own right. When people who plan for or participate in gatherings recognize a place as a "Thou" rather than as an "It" (Martin Buber) or something to be used, the possibility for transformation increases.

For two people I interviewed, this reciprocity in the relationship revealed itself in the way they talked about the potential of a place and environment to partner with us to support transformation.

The place is benevolent. It's not going to impose itself on you. It doesn't have an agenda. If you create a design that creates the space for that emergence, for what

the place can offer you to come in, to that degree you will see it more collectively.

Another kind of relationship that I experienced during my interviews is one that I can only call love. I had a profound sense, listening to people (especially founders or directors) speak about their places, that the care with which they held the space affected the place's ability to influence transformation. This love, like any love, requires the kind of reciprocity described above. In some cases, I had a sense that the person talking was embodying the place, an even more intimate level of connection. It seemed to me that this relationship affected the subtle forces that allow or inhibit transformational experiences. Love and care for a place can be felt and seen. When these are missing, the body knows.

I think that authentic people and place imbue each other.



A part of me was birthed when that room was birthed. I had the occasion to enter and surface my own story and myself in public there in a way I never had.

In addition to the profound holding through love mentioned above, I also discovered other levels of holding of a person for a place. In one interview in which a man described what was going on inside himself during a difficult phase of the group's process, I had a distinct sense that his own intent for unity and fulfillment of the group's purpose (along with his ability to synthesize and articulate what emerged in the room) became an actual container for the group's experience for a period of time. Another example of holding came clear when a woman who had been part of a team that convened a large gathering described a moment in the dining room the first night:

In this setting of people eating, being taken care of, choosing and being happy with the food, talking and having a good time, my personality shifted to feeling like being the hostess. A hostess in the sense of caring. How are you doing? Is everything okay? It felt very personal, like I had 200 relatives there.

This shift in her reflected, I believe, her unique contribution to holding the positive energy in the space, which later led to a group experience to remember.

A study participant's mention of the power of place to inform us about ourselves illustrated reciprocity in relationship. He stated that if we do not like a place or certain things about it, we have to look into ourselves to see why:

If we have difficulty with a place, it may not be the place, it may be us. We're limited, the place is not.

This view can open opportunities for learning and self-growth, individual and collective, for which we can thank the place, space or environment.

Relating to place as *Thou* created other questions for one interviewee. When I mentioned that it might be important to tell the story or history of the land to the group gathered there, she raised a question about who should tell the story. Should it be someone with the heritage who may have a more authentic voice with which to tell the story or should we ask permission from the land or native peoples before “using” it? These kinds of questions indicate, to me, an underlying assumption of reciprocity of relationship between person and place.

In a native culture, you ask the tree before you take the leaf, “Can I have this?” So to take the story of the land and use it for your purpose, who gives you the right?

In two gatherings, specific people spoke of an invitation to “ground and hold the space.” Holding a space describes a role voluntarily taken up by individuals in a group based on their deep caring for what can happen in this space; on their intimate experience of certain places, particular gatherings or people; and based on their sensitivity and their connection with the natural surroundings. This role is often assumed by someone who is older or considered an elder and also can be considered a function within any gathered group, termed *eldering*, to be performed by anyone of any age based on this array of intentions.

Two interviewees mentioned activities that were designed specifically to enable participants to put themselves into the place. One was an introductory exercise that invited people to contribute their more essential or inner selves to the conversation and group experience rather than state their titles, affiliations or positions. Another spoke of a ritual involving water brought from guests’ hometowns that were mingled together at the gathering, symbolizing a mutual connection with nature, our common humanity and communion with all those so gathered.

Finally, one study participant spoke at length about the relationship between personal authenticity and collective transformation in a space.

When we are authentically who we are, when we are real and honest, when we don’t hold back who we are, we not only connect with others, we connect with the place.

He further stated that very often, people have transformational experiences in a certain place and then find it hard to take it back to their real lives. When they feel this disconnect, they return to the place as a kind of refuge, but the work really is how we can

make all places in our lives transformational places and how we can embody authenticity in everything we do. When I asked this man, who had earlier stated his belief that certain spaces can become “spiritual power spots” because of energy accumulation, about the effect of “dipping” or immersion in these spots on a person’s ability to take out the energy, he said that he believed that this could help because such repeated experiences give us more chances, more practice, at being authentic:

The more chances we have to be authentic, and power places help us to do this, the more experience we have with being who we are, the more we can be who we are everywhere. The idea is to expand out so that everywhere can become a power spot, not that we take refuge in specific places and then can't relate when we return to the real world.

INTERPRETATION AND REFLECTIONS

In this section, I reflect upon the findings of this study and how the themes captured from the interviews and analysis might work together to reveal a larger picture of how the powers of place may contribute to collective transformation. Although the goal of phenomenological inquiry is to understand a particular phenomenon by examining descriptions of lived experience, which ultimately must be interpreted by each individual reader of this research, I attempt in this section to interpret what I heard in my special role in this endeavor. For this, I mapped the seven major themes alongside one another (visually) and took a step back to ponder the whole, to consider patterns in the themes and their relation to each other and to the whole. I further examined how all of this might be useful to people interested in groups and the potential of groups and gatherings of people for insight, innovation and concerted action. I questioned how this information might assist people committed to deepening their understanding of the art of convening meetings and gathering of groups with the intent to promote a shift of consciousness. I considered how might this research be useful, as well, for the rest of us, all who live in families and communities, work with colleagues, or serve and participate in volunteer organizations where place, space and environment are part of the experience?

Visible and Invisible Aspects

A first observation is that this process clarified two levels of information. One category of place and space elements were those people noticed and referenced as part of the group experience and which, they felt, contributed to the breakthroughs and shifts of consciousness as reported in the first three themes:

- (1) Geography and Natural Elements;
- (2) Design, Configuration and Contents; and
- (3) Aesthetic Beauty.

All of my interviewees identified some of these. Animals, geography, weather, art and artifacts, size and shape of space, fireplaces, circle layout of chairs, symbols, and availability of activities are examples. I call these aspects of the environment's influence *visible* phenomena. They are what people identify and articulate when asked.

The other four elements of experience that surfaced in this study comprise another category:

- (1) History, Meaning and Intention;
- (2) Energy Accumulation;

(3) Connection to Larger Wholes; and

(4) Love, Respect and Reciprocity.

These are less obvious to the eye but were noticed and communicated in various ways in nearly all of the interviews. These are what I call *invisible* phenomena or elements of experience that lie below the surface of direct awareness. They may be felt or sensed more than they are directly observed, and they are very powerful influencers, in my opinion. It may be that from the more visible elements, we catch glimpses of the larger principles that influence group transformation through place, space and environment.

The level of people's awareness of the invisible elements of experience surprised me. At the start of the inquiry, I expected to hear more about aspects of the visible environment that influenced the transformational experience. I anticipated these would fall into categories of concrete tangible features that could be reported and as such could be useful in creating and designing gathering places that support and enhance collective transformation. Indeed, this did occur. With

equal frequency, however, participants mentioned or alluded to less observable aspects. The way a person holds a place with reverence, for example, came through to me not only in what the person said but in how they said it. This phenomenon is the

Participants suggested that there are less tangible qualities associated with point of view, energy and meaning and described these as important with equal frequency and with strong conviction.

love to which I referred in the previous section—the respect, care and Thou-ness in their description of the setting. The idea of asking a place for permission to use its story, for example, or listening for what a nurse-log was telling a group communicated how my interviewees held the Other that is place, space and environment—as a living, knowing being equal to themselves. References to the accumulation of energy in a space over time and its ability to inform contemporary individuals and groups were abundant in this group of diverse people. The idea that walking paths were also seen as place with energetic lines running beneath them is fascinating to me. The idea suggests that places have a kind of timeless influence based on geography that goes beyond the history of events that happened there. The whole notion of place as alive, intelligent and willing to partner in healing processes is verdant with possibility.

Two other invisible elements of place and space—time and silence—were mentioned repeatedly in this study and, although they did not fit neatly into thematic categories, are important and worth noting here. Four interviewees mentioned time as performing a spatial function in terms of having enough of it for the purpose of the gathering. They spoke of time “holding” the process that the group experienced and noticed the detrimental effects of allocating too little time for parts of the process or for the gathering

itself. One woman said that too little time had been allowed for personal story to emerge in a gathering whose topic was especially controversial, contributing to the group's lack of breakthrough. Another mentioned participants in a three-day gathering who came late and "never really got it," though they stayed until the end.

Time was also mentioned as performing a holding function in terms of time taken to build relationships before the actual gathering (to each other, to the project, and to the land that figured prominently in this group's purpose for coming together).

The room itself was a metaphor for all of us being together, the time we had spent, the relationships between each individual that were sometimes developed over years. Without the prelude, which is not usually a part of meetings of this kind, I don't know if we would have had the same kind of meeting.

Silence in a group within a setting was another invisible but powerful aspect of transformation that was mentioned by two participants. One participant created a vivid image when he described a breakthrough moment

when a group gathered in a tent in the mountains of Colorado held two people with radically opposing viewpoints and shifted a potentially divisive situation to one of cohesion and recognition of common goals. Building on an image of concentric circles—nature holding the tent, the tent holding a circle of people, people holding the two men in their hearts—this interviewee ended by saying "and silence holding it all." This acknowledgment of the power of silence in transforming individuals and groups was a significant finding from my first study, *Group Magic* (2003), as well. Although time and silence may not be considered elements of place in a traditional sense, the fact that the people with whom I spoke described them as containers for transformational gatherings merits my inclusion of them in this paper.

The shift in perspective from creating and designing environments to asking a place and environment to partner with us to support transformation (then listening for what is offered) is a fundamental and provocative key finding of this research. One interviewee stressed that when people are authentic in a place, transformation can happen. This made me wonder about the authenticity of the place itself. Another person spoke of places not having an agenda, that they are just there and willing to partner with us if asked. How do we see and listen for the authentic being of a place? Are we too busy planning for how the place or space should be arranged to maximize our purposes to see what is there and what the place offers us? Our being in that kind of relationship with place is what I think so many of my interviewees referred to as an invisible but powerful characteristic of transformational places.

What is required of us to make that shift of perspective? One overarching message I received from studying this phenomenon is that a relationship with place, space or environment requires that we be changed in the process, not simply that a place and space be changed or used to create conditions for collective transformation. The process requires humility, a willingness to be vulnerable to the influence of place as Other. This echoes what I have heard so often in *Group Magic* (2003), that individual and collective transformation are inextricably linked. Can we really expect groups of people who are gathered in special places to change when they maintain their basic paradigms toward the place that is serving as container for their purpose—that the place is primarily there to serve them? I think this holds true for the people who work in the place (employees, staff, administration) as well and was mentioned in the interviews. If we consider these people as simply part of a place, therefore viewing and treating them as if they were there simply to serve us (like employees of a hotel, in the words of one of my interviewees), then what is the nature of transformation of consciousness that can happen in that space? Conversely, if we enter with reverence and respect for a place, and view the people as integral and vital to a place, as sacred Other, or One with ourselves, is collective transformation more likely to happen? I think so, but this has yet to be studied.

What I can say with certainty is that I have been changed in the process of completing this research around the powers of place. With new information from this study, I move from place to place in my own life with much greater awareness of setting and what it might offer. This heightened awareness is easier for me in nature where I sense the aliveness of all living beings, but I know that I am also more sensitive now to the built environment and urban landscapes. Is this transformation? I think so. I wonder what could happen if groups of people with such awareness were committed to and became skillful at working in full partnership with the environments that they inhabit?

Simultaneous Holding and Releasing Qualities

I noticed another overarching pattern when I considered the seven themes together. Initially I included this pattern as a theme, but because there were echoes of it in every theme, I decided to include the pattern here as a larger principle. As people identified and described elements of the places and spaces in which they had experienced collective transformation, they seemed to me to fall into two major categories (in addition to the visible/invisible ones mentioned above.) One category contained aspects of place that influence or serve what I call a *holding function* for the group. The other category contained aspects of places that influence or serve a releasing function. When both of these functions appear together in a setting, the possibility for collective (and individual) transformation seems to be enhanced (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Holding and Releasing Qualities.

In the interviews, people spoke of the importance of feeling contained, safe, comfortable, cared for and secure. Some said that feeling this way in an environment was necessary for the risks, leaps or shifts required for the occurrence of true transformation. As I reviewed all of the aspects of place mentioned in the course of all of the interviews, the following appeared to contribute to a holding function and therefore influenced feelings of safety, comfort, care, security and containment mentioned above:

- Locations in a valley, an island, or mountains surrounding a plateau;
- Homelike qualities such as teapots, photos of family members, small entry doorways;
- Nesting elements (i.e., rooms or tents holding circles of people holding individual bodies holding intentions);
- History, ancestors and accumulated energy providing context for and grounding of the current situation in happenings and consciousness of the past;

- People such as elders or facilitators grounding and holding the group;
- Colleagues that are familiar or who share a common goal or intent;
- Location that is sheltered and away, private and with nowhere to go;
- Spaces that fit the size of the group and circle formations of people;
- Nutritious and appealing food;
- Beauty and coherence of design in surroundings;
- Fire for warmth, intimacy, comfort and calm;
- Human bodies as containers for spirit and connection to the earth; and
- Facilitators and group members who are supportive and affirming.

The land itself felt
like a sanctuary.

At the same time, people mentioned aspects of their experiences that felt freeing to them, exhilarating and encouraging them to challenge themselves or take risks. Evidence of this releasing function were:

- Locations on mountain tops or places with broad vistas;
- Unfamiliar surroundings;
- Winding paths with no end in sight, surprise elements or synchronicities;
- Inclement or changing weather;
- Location at a distance, being away from home and away from the familiar;
- Diverse and unfamiliar group members;
- Anxiety, anticipation, not knowing what will happen at the gathering;
- Fire and water symbolizing danger;
- Opportunities for challenging activities—things new to members;
- Simplicity of the place or space, offering opportunities for creation and filling up;
- History and energy accumulation in evocative places or those that symbolize healing, resolution and possibility;
- Human bodies as vehicles for exploration and growth (e.g., sensual and physical awareness and sensitivities); and
- Facilitators or group members who provoke or challenge.

These are examples of what I have come to consider holding and releasing functions that contribute to a group and influenced by the place in which it gathers. The important point is that collective transformation requires both functions to be *simultaneously* present in an environment. If a meeting environment is too comfortable, people may fall asleep, physically or emotionally. If it is too strange, unfamiliar or stretching, people may run, hide or push back. I propose that when a place, space or environment simultaneously contains both holding and releasing functions, the conditions will be present that may increase the possibility for transformation. It is interesting to note here that some of the elements themselves contain both holding and releasing functions. Fire (warmth/comfort and danger), human bodies (grounding to earth and sensual exploration) and facilitators (supportive and challenging) are examples.

This finding echoes the results of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) study of flow experiences mentioned earlier in this paper. He discovered that optimal life experiences contain a balance of stimulation in the form of demands and challenges from a person's environment. It is the optimal balance, not too much or too little, that provides a context for the experience of flow. I think that there is more to be learned about group flow experiences from the link between the findings of these two studies.

Intent and Identity

Another principle that I discerned was the natural and significant integral connection of people and place. Resounding throughout the interviews was an implicit message that meaning and sense of self are anchored for both individuals and groups in the meaning and feeling of connection that they experience with place. The frequency with which people use place names as shorthand for a host of levels of experience such as the cohesiveness of group work or the profoundness of the experience is testament to this. Definition of self and qualities of relationship with others, with the environment and with larger forces are elaborated and grounded in the present and anchored in current physical circumstance (i.e., how we stand and move on the earth, how we notice and relate to the surround of natural elements, and how we are mindful of the sensory richness offered by nature and environments).

I offer these reflections to readers as ways to view their own settings, their experiences in groups and themselves. I hope and expect that the reader of this study will have reflections and insights that echo or build on what was uncovered here. It would be wonderful to have an opportunity for these responses to be heard and shared and could represent another level of inquiry into the phenomenon. I will consider it a measure of success of this research, if what is described here catalyzes further inquiry, generates further research and provides a means for people with like interests and sensitivities around the powers of place to find one another.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Systematic research answers many questions and poses many more. I believe this study has begun to answer the question, “What are the influences of place, space and environment on the possibility of collective transformation?” In the process, knowledge has become available to help researchers and others interested in group processes and is offered in the preceding pages. In this section, I share some directions for future work that are exciting to me and my colleagues.

Working in Partnership with Place and Environment

The relational dimension of people and places is fascinating. Significant attention brought to the I-Thou relationship between person and place and reciprocal relationships between guests and staff, guests and communities and guests and guests in this study is enlightening and bears further investigation. What does it mean “to learn with and from Nature” or to ask and then listen to what environment has to offer and what a particular geographic location “wants”? How is such information and guidance received and interpreted? In what ways can we cultivate our sensitivity to such communication? What does reciprocity of people with nature look like? What are the practices, both individual and collective, that will expand our capacities to honor, revere and reciprocate with place? What internal shifts will be required of us to be in a new relationship with place, space and environment?

How we work with this dynamic as a collective phenomenon is important. While as individuals we can become more aware of settings and how we relate to them, gatherings contain many individuals who relate in various ways to their surroundings. How can we be more conscious collectively and work with place, space and environment in partnership?

Energetic Fields Related to Place

A recurring theme in this pilot study and other prior research is acknowledgment of an energetic component of gathering places that influences transformation or potential for shift in consciousness. What is meant by the dimensions of energy or energetic fields as they relate to place? How are fields related to places in which diverse groups gather with shared intent? How are such fields experienced? What is meant by energetic fields surrounding or embedded within physical places such as historical energy, masculine/feminine energy, spiritual energy, ancestral fields and “knowing fields”? Can

these be described and measured? How? We need to do more work in this arena with phenomenological research, as in this pilot study, but also with carefully configured action research and experimentation.

In addition to energy fields, participants in this study referred to energetic shifts that they experienced during gatherings that seemed to be related to quantum movements in collective awareness. These subtle but profound shifting moments were felt in the body, not only (or necessarily) in the conscious awareness of the person. They occurred in the following situations:

- When a person was able to hold a significant paradox, such as opposing viewpoints on a political issue;
- When a person moved from identification with self to identification with larger wholes, such as their physical surroundings, nature, ancestors, or spiritual forces; and
- When tangible or visible elements of their environment took on expanded meaning, messages or purpose.

In *Group Magic* (2003), I explored factors that shift groups into what I call *collective resonance*. I discovered what these shifts felt like to people, when they occurred and what was their perceived significance to the individual and the group. This study brought forth new information, and I believe it is important to continue a line of inquiry that focuses on what we can know about collective transformation through individual energy and energetic shifts.

Walking Paths and Their Influence on Shift of Consciousness

An intriguing idea of movement as potential and prime influencer of transformational experience surfaced in this study, in particular the idea of walking together on a path as an approach to awareness, connection and deepening understanding. Walking on paths and traversing a geographic territory, for example in the Abraham's Path Initiative, as a means of collective transformation is a relatively new (or decidedly old) concept. Most meeting or gathering places we had identified for our pilot study are singular locations where people dialogue in circle formation or sit together in designated spaces. What is the transformational effect of people moving side by side along a common path, sharing a journey or movement toward a joint horizon? (Note: Although I suggested above that walking side by side and in groups is a "new" concept, Gandhi and King may disagree. There also is a lot to learn from those who are practiced at Walking the Labyrinth, a collective ritual based on ancient tradition that is grounded in the earth and now commonly undertaken in groups.)

Symbols and Archetypes as Structures That Influence Transformation

Symbols and archetypes appeared as aspects of exceptional collective environments in this and previous studies: circles, enclosures, doorways, thresholds, bridges, paths, journey, fire, water, sanctuary. What can we learn about the interface between natural and built environments or an interface that is naturally generative and vibrant like the edges of adjoining ecosystems? Although archetypes apparent in both physical settings and from imaginal worlds have been acknowledged in previous work, what can we learn about their specific role in influencing collective transformation?

Aesthetics and Beauty: Wholeness, Coherence and Spirit

Directly or indirectly, interviewees referred to what might broadly be described as the influence of aesthetics on shift of consciousness. More specifically, their descriptions echoed a principle voiced by many conveners and practitioners in the transformation field: the presence of beauty (natural or manmade), artistic design and pleasing appearance in an environment potentially affect a profound emotional response (discernible also as a “spiritual response”) among those gathered. How does this happen? What do people notice that they instinctively perceive to be beautiful or visually pleasing? How does this awareness influence their sense of wholeness, connection with others, with the place in which they are gathered and the meanings that they give to their experiences? What more can we learn about the domain of aesthetics as it relates to collective transformation or about the role of perception and the particular qualifiers (sensual and dimensional) of tangible artifacts and/or physical environment that influence group experience?

Integrating Diverse Perspectives

In the process of conducting this study, it became increasingly apparent that principles of place, space and environment are embedded deeply into a wide array of disciplines and individual perspectives from which people work and live their lives. In reviewing the literature, I discovered some of the academic and professional disciplines that consider place important—architecture, art, psychology, health, neuroscience, for example. I did not include in this paper other fields, such as dance and theatre, in which place and space figure prominently. I am certain that further inquiry would uncover many more disciplines to explore.

I think it is important to continue to understand the diverse perspectives, not only in terms of disciplines but also from the perspectives and lived experiences of a wide variety of people. Although the size of this study limited the diversity of the population of interviewees, it is vital that future work attempt to tap into the wisdom of people from different cultures, racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, and a variety of other factors.

There is much more to learn, and I can envision exchanges of perspectives in groups of people that will exponentially increase what we know and how we use it.

Conclusion

Although we strive, as human beings, to understand and make sense of our experiences in the world, there is much that we will never know about transformational processes. I therefore conclude this paper by acknowledging the role of mystery and larger processes of unfolding beyond the realm of human understanding. We can catch glimpses of the relationship between people and the places, spaces and environments they inhabit by the telling of their lived experience, but we can never fully know the forces at work in nature and in the universe that partner with us as we attempt, individually or collectively, to make our world a better place.

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