



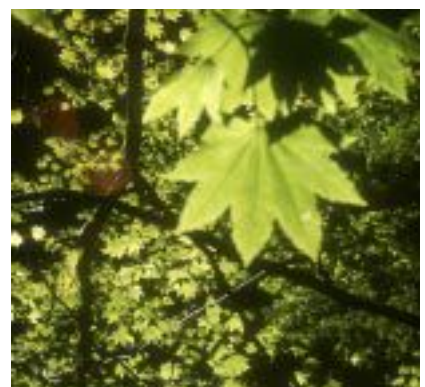
PLACES TOUCHING SPIRIT: **Gateways to Deep Reality**

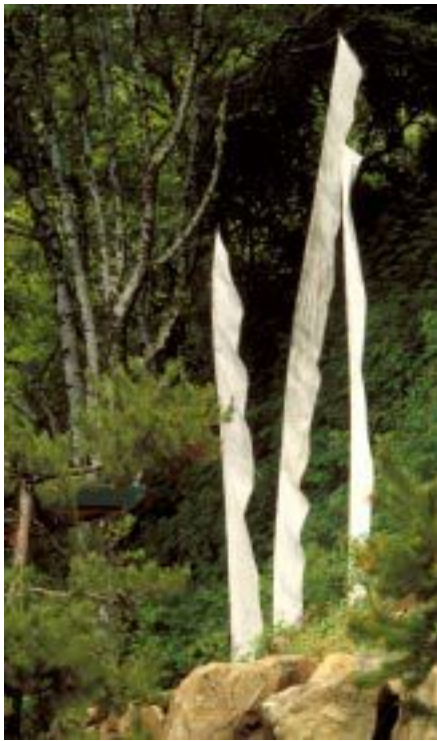
Tom Bender

*In direct experience of primal forces,
without mind,
we become
intensely and intimately
every fiber
of what we behold.*

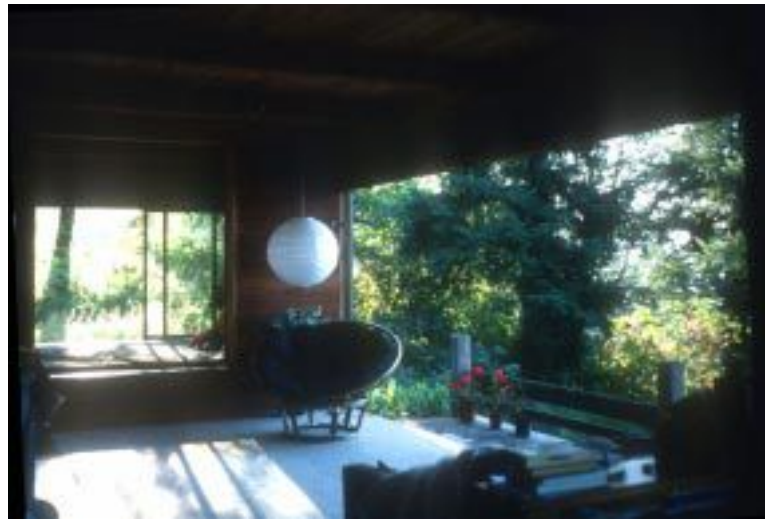
The places we live in have potential for profoundly deep connection with the rest of nature. Experience through them, of the true realities that we inhabit, can transform our lives and bring our actions into alignment with deep purpose.

A minimal aspect of such places is simply *being with*. Sharing our places with other life, rather than being apart. A garden to shelter and nurture our souls. The simple undemanding presence of other richness, other magic, other unfurling of the possibilities of Creation. There is more to our world than just the everyday worries and events of our individual lives. Life exists, whose well-being is necessary to our own survival. There is beauty, unexpected discoveries, seeds of joy.



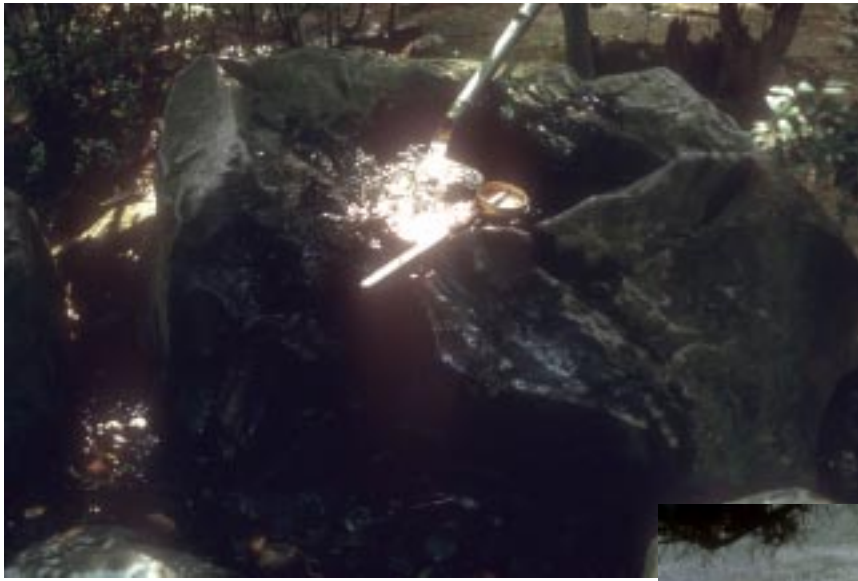


Being with, we remember community, and our shared nature – equally with the wonderful aspects that distinguish one part of us from another.



With that, celebration, honoring, and connection to those lives becomes an integral part of our places.





We can also connect through *places of contemplation*. Places that focus attention on just the reality of the patterns, processes and relationships embodied in the garden. The utterly simple complexity of other life living.



Problems of the day set aside, relaxation achieved, our energy restored somehow by this connectedness. Hints of principles that underlie the unfolding of new possibilities.



A particular application of this is gardens for *inner processing*. The well-honed analytic process so central to our culture is only one of a vast spectrum of approaches to problem solving, to personal and cultural growth, to unfurling new possibilities.

There are particular flows and patterns that, immersed in, can aid the absorption, digestion, and integration of analytic information. These can balance, improve effectiveness, and achieve results unachievable with our conventional processes alone.





There are, of course, also gardens for *meditation*. Most familiar are the typical Japanese “Zen Gardens”. These, and other places, are often energized to enable and empower particular connections on the energetic or spirit levels, to access particular realms or entities, or caches of information.

They focus attention, exclude peripheral thoughts, quiet the rational consciousness, and open access to the unitary consciousness that connects all life. Those skilled in the use of such gardens can easily shift into states of unity with other consciousness.

* * *

We operate in our material world and the energetic world simultaneously, and perceive with our rational consciousness and our unitary consciousness in parallel. The power of our 3-D senses normally overpowers the quiet voices of our unitary consciousness. Those “voices” of unitary consciousness are not the same as the intense experience of deep reality through “silent knowing”.



Qi energy is the core interactive mechanism between the material and energetic realms. It is a faster-than-light standing-diffraction-wave magnetic energy that underlies, manifests, and energizes objects in our material universe. Qi has been the core of the healing arts, sacred sciences, and architecture of more than 65 cultures worldwide.

Where appropriate, entire facilities can be designed to provide deep and powerful experience of natural forces. Spas, for example, can be anything from pamper places for the wealthy to healing places for illness. In Japan, public baths are a vital and ancient core-cultural tradition. The *sentos*, or public baths, in every village provided warmth, relaxation, bathing, massage, herbal healing soaks and community. *Onsen*, the natural hot springs version of a sento, often provide stirring experience of nature as well.

How such a facility is designed can shape and empower the experience. In the preliminary design I did a few years ago for an onsen in the Pacific Northwest, a reconstructed Japanese timber-framed *minka*, or farmhouse, was planned to provide sheltered access from parking to the hot springs. But not just shelter. The dimly lighted space, filled with steam rising from the exposed rocks below was to make visitors viscerally aware that this was *the earth's* heat - water warmed by the fiery forces deep within the earth.



Other elements combined to give added dimensions to the experience:

- The onsen's location was an hour from the city – with simple meals and lodging available, but no TV or newspapers. A break from the urban world and its electronic and dietary drugs that keep people tied into a specific belief system and reality. Time for immersion, relaxation, rejuvenation, meditation, and inward experience.
- A shrine structure, with a lighted candle visible through the steam, acknowledged and energized a spiritual potential of the experiences offered.



- The onsen site was located on a bench 300' above the Columbia River - an ancient sandbar from the colossal floods that once swept down the river. The floods, pouring eight *cubic miles* of water *a minute* down the Gorge, left amazing geological artifacts throughout the region. The "sand grains" in this sandbar average two feet in diameter. A meditation garden of these giant sand grains brought by the river from far away places gave an opportunity to connect with the river and the immensity of its events that shaped the region.

- The onsen site was across the river from Mt. Hood, one of the Cascade volcanoes that provide silent witness to the geological forces that continue to shape the region. Another meditation garden was to focus on a small, somewhat non-descript mountain next to the onsen. Here *meaning*, not esthetics, was primary.

A realization slowly emerged, viewing this mountain, that it was the basalt neck – like the Devil’s Tower in Wyoming – of a far more ancient volcano, with its ash slopes eroded away. This was the *mother* of Mt. Hood. And another mountain further away, the *grandmother* of Mt. Hood. The visceral experience of the immensity of geological time and the history that flooded a person in this garden was enough to tear away the blinders of conventionally that keep us focused on the mundane everyday events of our lives.



- A simple meadow-grass covered hillside invited people to sprawl out their hot-springs-relaxed bodies; to let energy flow through them from the earth and sky, unblocked by our usual bodily tensions. Overhead, the sky-rivers of clouds or the vast wheeling of the stars usually blocked out by urban lights and distractions. Being touched by more dimensions of the wholeness that truly constitutes our interwoven lives.



- The dark and unassertive covered bathing pools of the hot springs were designed as a framing and focusing mechanism, bringing full attention to the exquisiteness of each tree and rock and sky and water; their reflected beauty, and their invitation to join together.



- Finally prepared, a guest would emerge into the outdoor onsen pool, and turn to see the setting of which it was part - a dramatic sunset view down the river.

Understating, rather than promoting, a spectacular setting allows us to open our hearts, slip into being part of it, and part of the awe-inspiring interwoven beauty and consciousness we are feeling.

A visitor to the onsen is now physically relaxed, shaken loose from everyday moorings. Visceral awareness emerges of the immense and unfathomable interweavings of time, process, and relationship upon relationship which truly constitute a reality extending far outside our familiar 3-D world.

It then becomes possible to hear the quiet voices of the unitary consciousness through which we know, and can experience, the simultaneous truths that constitute our universe.



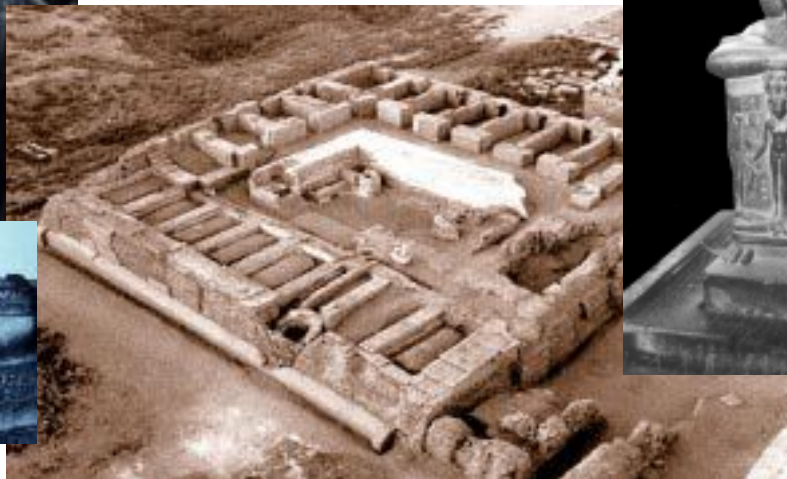
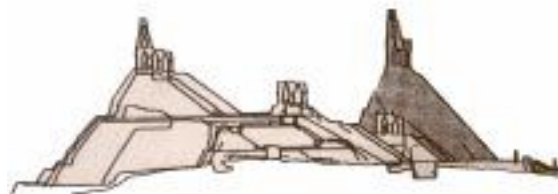
There are other ways, through their energetic dimensions, for our places to enable deep touching of spirit. Places can enable and enhance profoundly different ways of knowing and experiencing reality, our own nature, and that of the rest of the realities we inhabit.

ENERGIZED GATEWAYS

In almost every culture are found examples of what are called living statues, portals to the spirit world, or simply sacred places. Some are inhabited by deities, some give connection to ancestors, or various aspects of the spirit world.

In the Haida tradition in the Pacific Northwest, we find entry to the clan houses through the beak of Raven, or giant carved "Bear" posts holding the roof beams, which are energized to connect to the clan's protective and guiding totem spirits. In Egypt we find both "healing statues" and statues to connect with deceased Pharaohs. In Maya communities we have whole temples and plazas energized to accomplish similar goals.

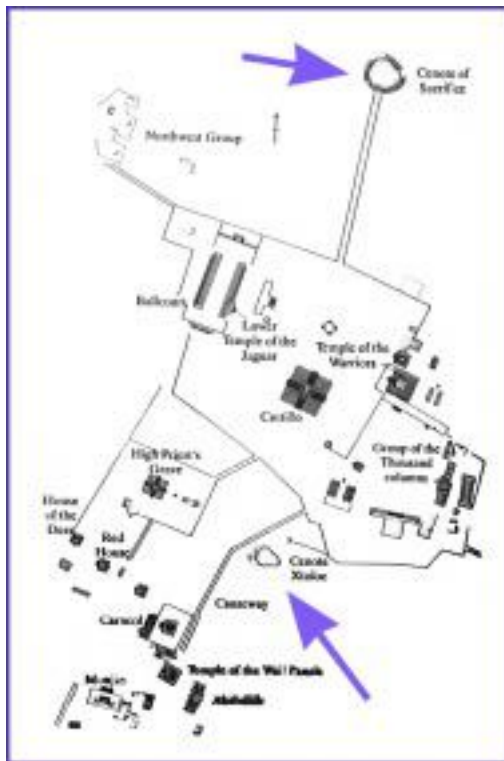
What these all have in common is that through intention of the inhabitants, through the grace of the spirits, or through what we might from the outside call mere circumstance, they have developed energetic linkage to particular aspects of the spirit realms. To those of us who cling to the belief that our world is only a material one, this makes little sense. To those who have, like other cultures, experienced some of these other realms, it explains the true purpose, function, and importance of many important architectural and garden achievements of other cultures.



Some energized gateways are geologically-caused. In the Yucatan, many Mayan cities contain sacred places called *cenotes*. There are more than 3000 of these sinkholes in the limestone rock, often accessing the only dependable water supply. What is unique to many of these cenotes, and the cause of their “sacredness” is that they appear to be alive. Winds pour in and out of them in six-hour-long inbreaths and outbreaths, like the breathing of some giant being. The water levels rise and fall in tune with the inbreaths. The air has strange smells. Some cenotes moan and make strange sounds. The impact of such behaviors provides the emotional energy to activate intention manifesting things in our world.

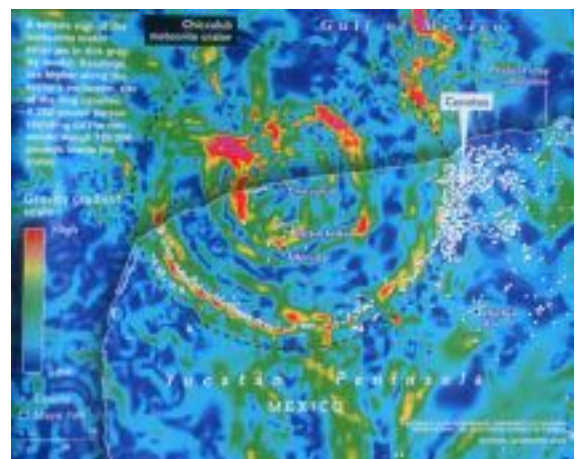
The cause of these strange effects is definitely otherworldly. They arise from an ancient meteoric impact that shattered the limestone crust in the area,

establishing and linking what evolved into a network of underground waterways.



Much of this network was connected with the ocean, the tidal rise and fall of the waters compressed the air in the underground caverns, forcing it in and out of the openings.

Understanding the cause of these phenomena in no way decreases the emotional impact of their experience, nor their ability to impact the activation of qi energy-related events.





A different example of geologically-influenced energized gateways is Machu Pichu in Peru. Crustal compression of a giant faulted granite batholith causes concentration of magnetic energies beneath Machu Pichu. These are accentuated at the peaks of giant granite “needles” on the site of the city. This empowered ritual and access to the spirit world at those places. Much of the physical form of Machu Pichu is terracing to access and use these sites.



Other “sacred rocks” were energetically linked to the *apu*, or spirits of the powerful surrounding peaks.





SHAMANIC EXPERIENCE

Natural and altered sites are used worldwide to learn to break free from our sensory- and belief-trained self-limitation to the physical dimension of the realms we inhabit. Kivas dug into the earth in the Pueblo traditions, cave temples in India, caves in the Incan world, power spots in Hawaii and around the world have all been used for this purpose. I've discussed some of the techniques used to empower such places in my *"Cave Temples of India"* DVD.



Chincheru, in the Sacred Valley of Peru, is a single limestone boulder – some 50' in diameter – set amongst the fields of the valley. It's



top is eroded, and carved for ritual purposes. It's underside is coated with an incredible patina of limestone. Steps have been carved part way around its outermost edge, and the interior contains cavities larger than a person. Such sites are energized, and used for specific training rituals to break people loose into their deeper levels of existence.

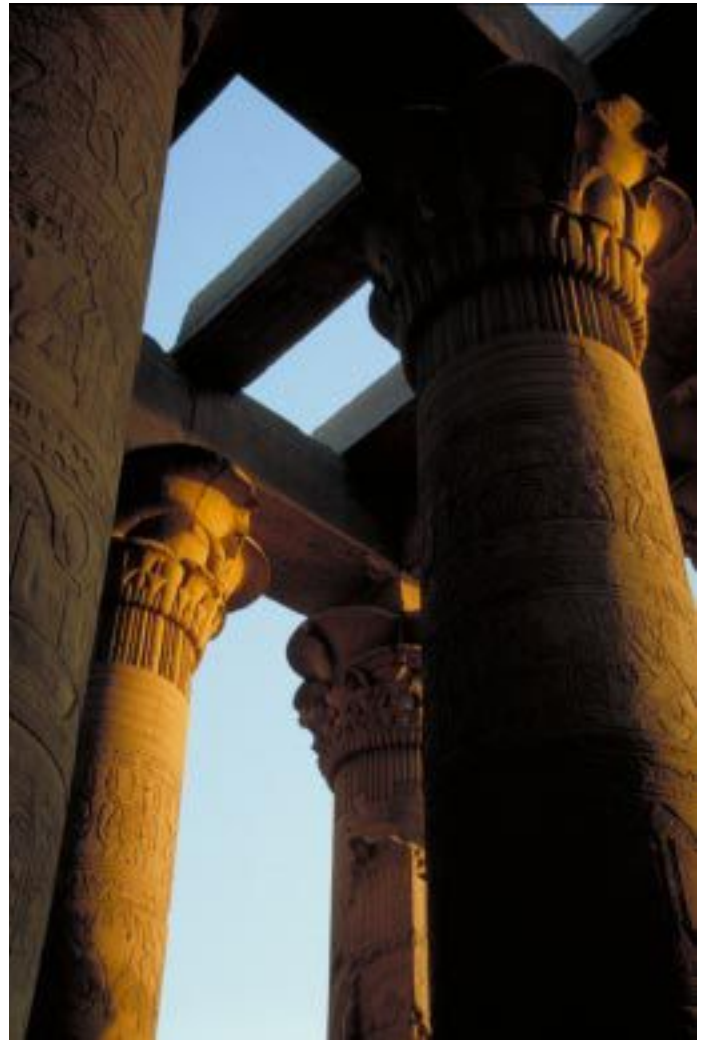


INITIATORY REALMS

The Temple of Sobek at Kom Ombo in Egypt is dedicated to the crocodile god. Part of the initiatory ritual in the temple supposedly involved diving into a subterranean tunnel, connected to the Nile, which led to a crocodile-occupied underground chamber, and then by another water-filled tunnel back to the surface inside the temple. If you had favor of Sobek, you wouldn't be eaten.

This is as true a shamanic process as walking barefoot on 1200 degree burning coals, deep meditation, or going face-to-face in the jungle with a jaguar. If our intention is clear and positive, we are honored and received, and blessed. If not, we probably hesitate and pull back from doing what is asked. What is involved is initiation into working with realms outside of our familiar three-dimensional material world.

Those realms exist - even our physics now has to acknowledge that. Kom Ombo is an architectural setting for finding courage to let go of the props of the material world and leap the chasm to the realms where we can experience and learn directly from trees, rocks, and all that occupy the energetic and spirit realms.



Initiation to experience of deeper reality does not always require settings such as Kom Ombo. The initiatory sites used from tribal Africa to Tibet employ a variety of energized natural features - trees, caves, pools of water, and also constructed structures, sites, and temples.

There are many routes to connection with our deeper realities. Our focus here is only to realize the spectrum of experience possible through the places we inhabit.



Malidoma Somé talks in his autobiography, *Of Water and the Spirit*, of a few of the experiences in African tribal initiation he was permitted to speak of. He speaks of a process of reconnecting with his center, “The center is both within and without. It is everywhere. But we must realize it exists, find it, and be with it, for without the center we cannot tell who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.”

In one initiation experience, he was set before a sizeable tree, and asked to look hard at it. A day later, he let go of his rational mind, his pride, his fear of vulnerability and humility, and merged with the tree on a deep, wordless level, experiencing the expression of immeasurable love that united them. That deep, wordless knowing is core to the tribal experience of the world, giving a fullness, knowingness, and security that is missing in our cultural experience. Overcoming the fixity of our conventionally trained experience of the body and material world is the hardest part of initiation.

Traditional education, he explains, consists of three parts: enlargement of one’s ability to see, destabilization of the body’s habit of being bound to one plane of being, and the ability to voyage trans-dimensionally and return. Enlarging one’s vision and abilities has nothing supernatural about it, rather it is “natural” to be part of nature and to participate in a wider understanding of reality.

This is the realm of primal unity with the rest of nature that is our heritage and grounding – a heritage essential for our survival and for truly experiencing the multi-dimensional reality we inhabit. All these gateways to deep reality are tools to help us reach and sustain that connection, which nourishes the deep parts of our nature and opens the true potentials for growth and achievement as individuals and as a culture. It is a vital and core part of reconnection and sustaining connection with our deepest nature and that of the rest of reality.

What we are talking about here is not landscaping, or building design or conventional art or “connection with nature”.

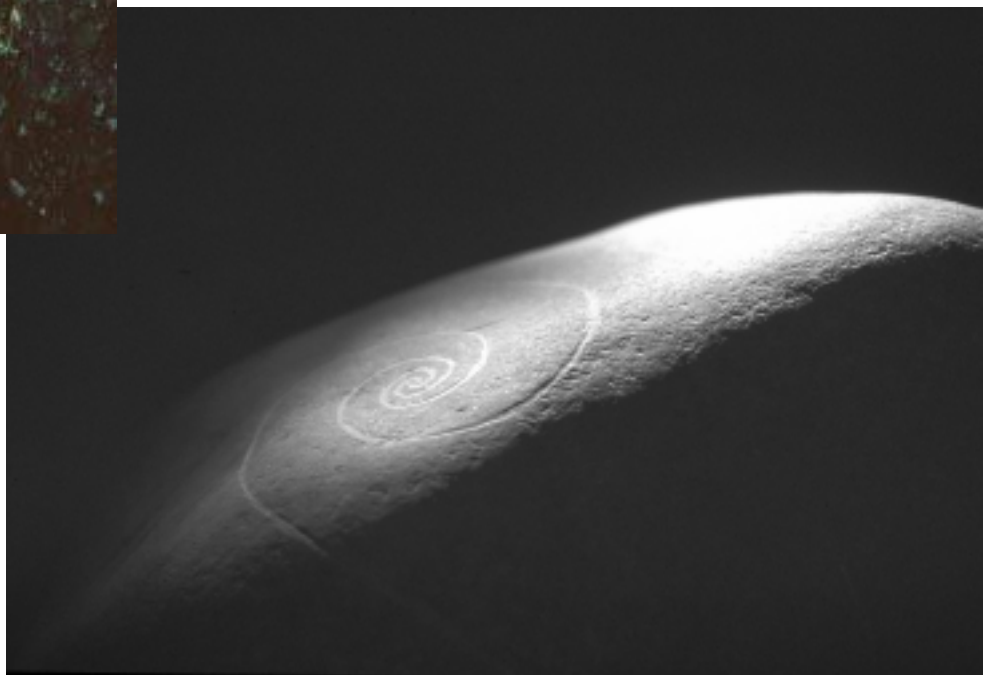
Primal experience is not a rational thing, and those building arts are approached as rational practices in our culture. What places touching spirit entail comes from somewhere else.

Places touching spirit come from the realm of love, not of rational consciousness. It comes from the realm of integral consciousness that connects us with all Creation, not from the mental consciousness that we use in analytic processes. It comes from the primal urge to Oneness inherent in the nature of all life.



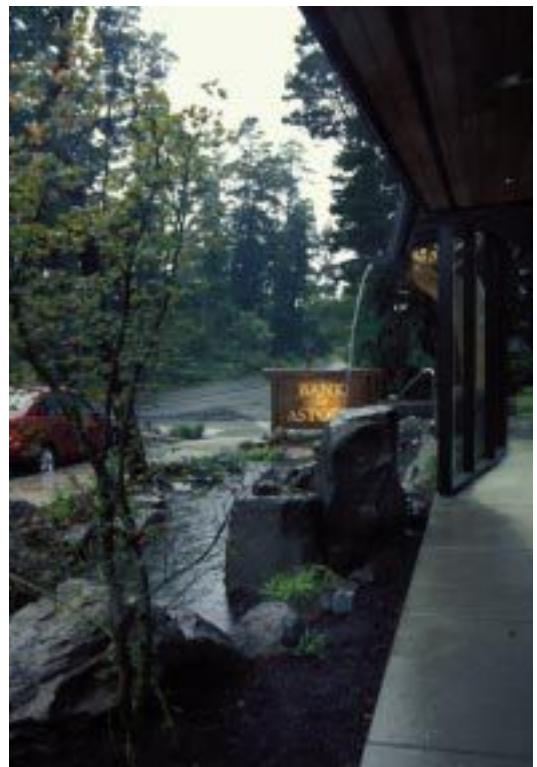
Rational talk about love is not the same as experiencing love. There are ways of being with our places and the life surrounding us that arise out of the heart, not the mind. These are ways of being which bring into existence profound ongoing connection, awareness, and understanding. This in turn transforms us, releasing us from the separation and isolation from the rest of Creation which has been inherent in our culture.

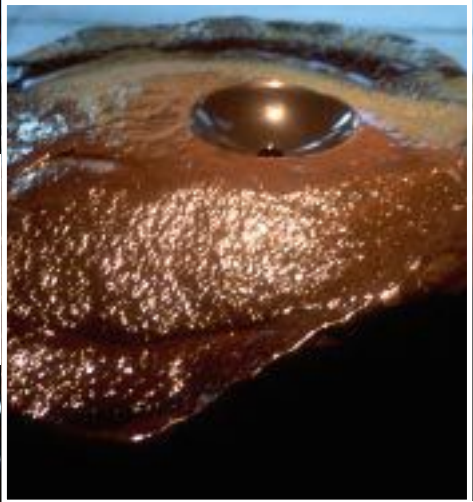
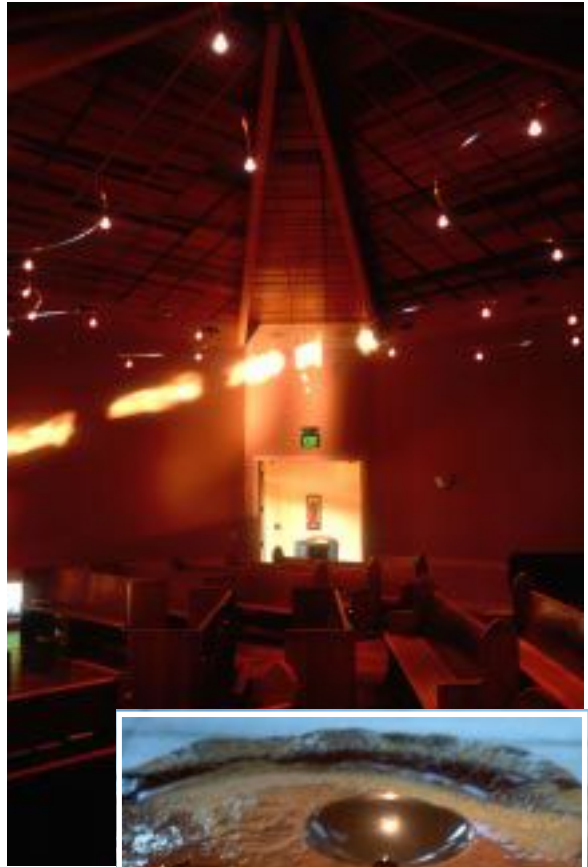
Placemaking coming from this realm produces places which are literally alive, and which in turn enliven and nurture us in our use and being with them.





Such "living architecture" gives a new sense of fullness and joyful abundance to both our places and our lives.





Exerience of deep reality opens avenues for others to experience the dance of creation and the realms of spirit, empowering new opportunities for growth in our lives and our culture.

