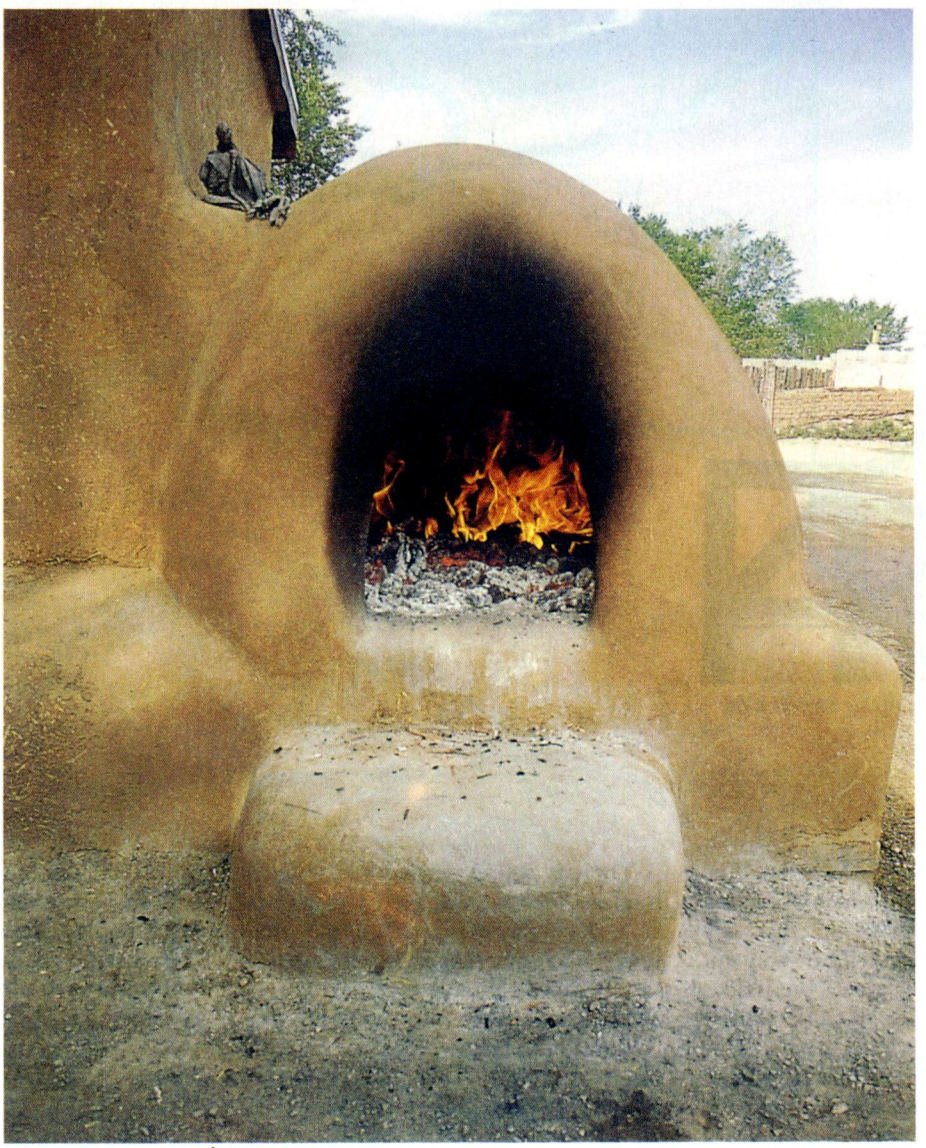
BEING AT HOME

TOM BENDER

PLACE is a sacred song and not just an address in space.



A welcoming fire transforms a place into a home. PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID PEARSON. REPRINTED FROM *EARTH SPIRIT*, GAIA BOOKS (£11.99).

POWERFUL MEANING IS found in architecture if it ties us to the specialness of a particular place. No two places on our planet are entirely alike. The communities of living things that each place brings forth are as unique as the patterns of its weather, terrain, geology and its own surroundings. Each place has unique powers to stir our hearts and minds and it brings into being a human community as uniquely moulded to the potentials of that place as its communities of plants, birds, animals and insects. In becoming at home in these places and responding to the special kinds of comfort, challenge and sustenance we find in each, we become people of unique kinds. People of the mountains, of the desert or of the plains, we each come to have special qualities of our own to give to the tapestry of human society.

When we live close to these natural surroundings, we come to know and love them deeply and to build in ways which reflect our joy in being a part of them. Our buildings come to draw us into the web of natural forces of the place, and take form from the special spirit of each place. They take on the special qualities of snow country, prairie, piedmont or bayou. Such buildings vent or hoard heat as needed. They shield from or welcome the sun and wind, depending on the season and place. Their palette of colour is attuned to the space-filling white light of snow country, the pastels

of fog country, the green light of the forest, or the golden sunsets and turquoise waters of the tropics. They know their world, and are fully a part of it.

Winter in the Northwest of the USA is endless, wet, and dreary, as oppressive as the burning summer heat of the Southwest deserts. Yet the oppressive Northwest winter is transformed into meaning and beauty when we walk in the silent mist-filled and moss-covered forests that once covered the region. The endless maritime rain finds meaning and value in the lush and towering forests, in the bountiful life that it brings into being as nowhere else on Earth.

In the same way, the heat and dryness of the desert find meaning and acceptance in what they in turn make possible. The desert provides the solitude and freedom from distractions of more peopled places. It connects us with the overpowering sense of stellar space and time of its brilliant starlit nights. It brings us into touch with the epochal sense of geological duration and change that arises from an Earth unencumbered by a profusion of life. These qualities are sensed nowhere else with the same power and intensity.

A BUILDING CAN DRAW us deeply into the forces of nature. There is a famous story about a Japanese tea master who was given a piece of land with an outstanding view of the Inland Sea. When his teahouse was finished, his first guests arrived, eagerly awaiting the view. They were shocked to find that he had planted a hedge that totally blocked out the sea.

Before they entered the teahouse itself, they bent to drink the traditional cleansing dipperful of water. Just as the water in the dipper touched their lips, a hidden opening in the hedge exposed a view of the waves breaking on the rocks below.

Inside, when the master had finished the tea ceremony, he quietly slid aside the shoji screens and brought the dramatic view of the sea below together with the taste of water that still lingered on their lips and in their hearts.

We don't need a perfect site or the discipline of a Zen master to create a home that is "at home" in its surroundings. What we *do* need is an attentiveness to our actions and a willingness to take full advantage of the opportunities that present themselves. A new window can let in the moonrise or the daily rhythms of the sun. A skylight over our beds can bring us close again to night and the stars. New south windows can bring in needed warmth and sunlight. Trees and vines can give shade and coolness.

Fixed windows made openable can allów a breeze to pass through with its messages from afar. Materials, colours, and furnishings can draw on sources native to our region. A tiny garden outside our window can keep us close to the dripping moss, ancient rocks, or sunlit leaves of our more distant surroundings.

ONE OF THE CENTRAL attitudes that thread through this deeper way of building is a sense of honouring, of demonstrating respect and appreciation. The tortured life of a spruce root that had grown squeezed among rocks on a beach once opened my eyes to this. It showed me the many ways our buildings can deny or express the seamless web of love, awe and respect that is part of the sacredness of our world.

We found the old, twisted spruce root on the beach after a storm, dragged it home, and eventually made it into the handrail of our stair. Its gnarled shape silhouetted against the soft light form inside nudged my mind every night as I came in from the dark.

Part of the root's specialness was that it still held the history of its past life. Most building materials have had their history cut, sanded, and varnished away. The contortions of an old tree, like the wrinkles and stoops of an old person, tell of the adventures and struggles of its life. That life is worth sharing. There is a beauty in that history and the shapes of natural materials, a value in honouring those lives that have been given up into the making of our buildings. Incorporating the twists and bumps of unprocessed materials takes more time and effort. It need not be done, however, for *every* piece of rock or wood — just enough to keep us aware of the lives that have been given up into the making of our places.

The concept of honouring others goes far beyond how we use materials. One of our most basic human needs is to feel the value we give to others, to have a sense of human dignity and meaning in our relationship with others.

Yet how do we honour and respect the dignity and self-worth of others when we build or furnish our buildings? Do we give the carpenters, masons, and furniture-makers any latitude to do their best rather than their least, or any encouragement to put their hearts instead of just their time into their work?

Think, if you were a builder, how you would consider your work differently if an owner put $1,000 in the budget for you to choose a way to make the place you're building special. That "1% for heart" would most likely cause you to start thinking about how to make *every* part of the building a little bit better. You would probably end up expressing that attitude in the whole building as well as just the part where you put the extra budget. And you would feel different both about your work while doing it and about the product once done.

The concept of "best — not least" may cost more — initially. But it also gives more in return. Things are more deeply loved and better maintained, counteracting the cost of our social ills that stem from lack of self-worth and satisfaction in work. Everything does not have to be hand-done and elaborate, lest it become overwrought — just enough to allow others to take pride in their work. It allows them in turn to give a special contribution to our homes.

Even with initial costs, we can choose the alternative of a smaller but better-quality home, or less but better-quality furniture. A home half the average size today is still as large as the average just twenty years ago! And think for a minute how quickly we are willing to demand minor savings that dehumanize the people who craft our homes, while at the same time wasting far, far, more on sloppy debt patterns on our purchases! It is a question of values, not cost.

How we arrange and use the insides of our homes also conveys a sense of what we honour most highly. The English build a parlour to honour guests. The Japanese place an honoured guest at a meal in front of their tokonoma so that others will associate the guest with the specialness of the flowers and art displayed in it for the occasion. In ages past, the fire was the heart (hearth) of the home. Now we arrange our living-rooms around a tv like worshippers around an altar. ●

An extract from the author's book ***The Heart of Place,*** *available from Tom Bender, 38755 Reed Road, Nehalem, OR 97131, USA, at $15.00. Tom Bender is an architect and was editor of* ***Rain*** *magazine.*