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- David Seamon, editor. *Dwelling, Seeing, and Designing: Toward a Phenomenological Ecology* (1993);
- Robert Mugerauer, *Interpretations on Behalf of Place: Environmental Displacements and Alternative Responses* (1994);
- Louise Chawla, *In the First Country of Places: Nature, Poetry, and Childhood Memory* (1994).

## Interpretations on Behalf of Place

Environmental Displacements  
and Alternative Responses

Robert Mugerauer

State University of New York Press

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*For Martha and Hugo Leipziger-Pearce  
Colleagues, Friends, and Neighbors*

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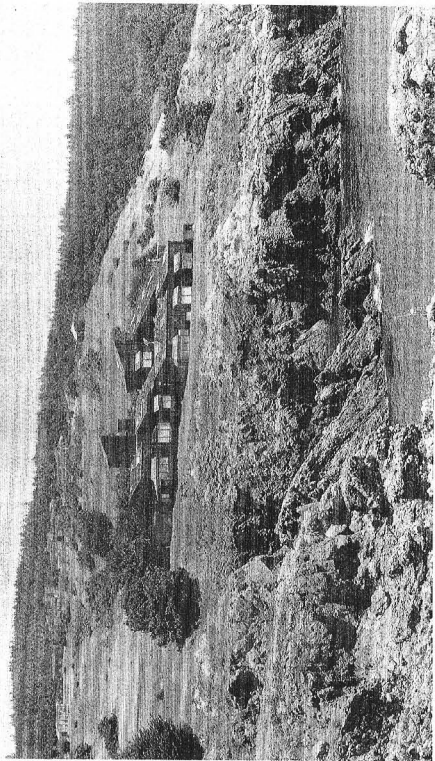
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FIGURE 7-7.  
Moore, Lyndon, Turnbull, Whitaker, Sea Ranch, California. Architecture of Collective Memory.



and meditation. These microcosms help make the broader cosmos habitable. Thus, the garden and house do not avoid the outside world—not even by clever play with images—but become a means for authentic design and living.<sup>24</sup>

In a highly original manner, Swiss architectural anthropologist Nold Egener proposes a strategy akin to, though more historical and empirical than, those I have been considering here.<sup>25</sup> He too insists that we need to reread the past with adequate macro- and micro-theory and recover the meanings of potent dimensions that have been installed in building from prehuman times. Egener's striking argument is that we completely misunderstand the action of building and the character of architecture when we reductively see it in pragmatic terms of "shelter" or production processes and consumption.

Following an ingenious inductive method, he distinguishes four phases and types of construction and architecture: (1) subhuman architecture, in which the three species of higher apes daily build nests, (2) semantic architecture, or nondomestic built elements, used for ritual purposes and serving as cognitive models, thus producing symbolic meanings and establishing architectonic forms, (3) domestic architecture, the end result of the first two phases of constructive behavior, in which internal space is produced, (4) settlement architecture, also deriving from local semantic architecture and the rituals of cyclical renewal, by which a group's narrative origins and social hierarchy are preserved.<sup>26</sup>

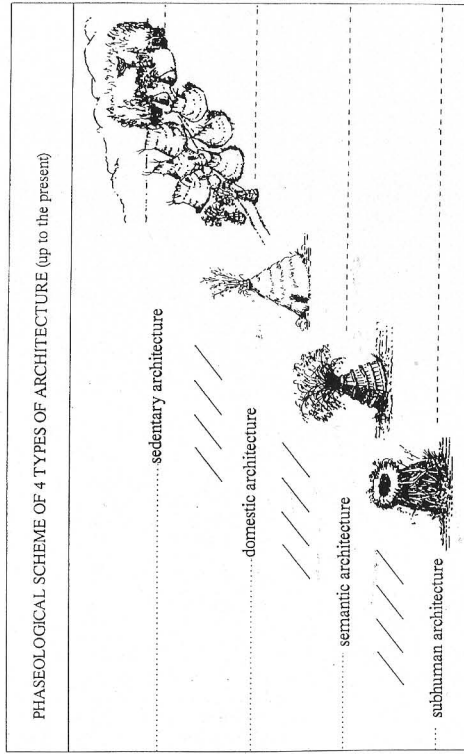
If Egener is correct about the manner in which the primal origins in natural (prehuman) and nondomestic sacred (semantic) rituals lie at the heart of building,

buildings essentially structure human environmental space. This would mean that man—as always—not only perceives, but integrates the spatial structure defined by buildings and reproduces this structure in other contexts, thinks with it, works with it. . . . [T]his type of spatial structure generated by buildings, influences man along an anthropological continuum and lives in our language, in our thoughts, keeps the arts living and even supports originally metaphysical ideas.<sup>27</sup>

What a revolutionary reinterpretation. Egener's bold argument, then, is that our ancient construction practices and our earliest ritual and symbolic production of forms first enabled us to think of the world and act as we do, and only subsequently led to building enclosures in which we could live.

The implications of this view for research and practice would be enormous. Through the "perception of [these] new classes of construction" such as the subhuman and the semantic just noted, we would be able to move from the confines of *a priori* metaphysical thinking and aesthetic deduction, to dramatically widen our understanding of architecture and to open the possi-

FIGURE 7.8.  
Nold Egenier, Phascological Schema of 4 Types of Architecture



Phascological schema of architectural anthropology. The 4 types represent most important sources still palpable today. They can be used to reconstruct a constructive continuum which parallels human evolution.

bility of an interpretive, yet objective inductive approach. By tracing out our "ancient constructive and dwelling behavior," we would be able to "describe empirically [and] document by criteria *imminent to architecture*, such as the materials and types of construction, resulting form, spatial and temporal conditions, social relations, etc."<sup>28</sup>

And, not only would we gain a new understanding of architecture through the study of past forms and constructions, but we would revise our interpretation of ourselves and become able to "reconstruct essentially new outlooks." Explicitly positive factors could emerge for today through architecture anthropology if we can retrieve "the actuality of the primitive: a really humane and generally valuable architecture could be based on well founded principles."<sup>29</sup>

Both with the radical theoretical reassessment of primal human constructions and architectural meanings and with the practical, creative transformations of archetypal designs, then, we find pointers for dealing with the technological landscape. We need to let the powerful forms of the enduring past come forth in a way that is fully appropriate to our time and place.