IMPLICATIONS OF HOUSE IMAGES ACCORDING TO GASTON BACHELARD: A HOUSE BY THE SEA

by

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ABSTRACT

The image is created through cooperation between real and unreal, with the help of the functions of the real and the unreal...if a house is a living value, it must integrate an element of unreality.

Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space

To concretize a single image of dream house from fragments of opposing images that are half-hidden in the shadows of the imagination can be a difficult and lengthy task, especially if the site, a real one, presents a timeless Maine island landscape so rough and powerful and complete as to appear to resist human intervention. I am just a visitor on
the site by the sea. The nature of the landscape has assured my status to be that.

Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological discussion of the poetics of house in his book *The Poetics of Space,* illuminates many of my dream images for a house in this place. This thesis is a poetic exercise aimed at describing a personal dream place; an exploration of literary, poetic and philosophical images presented by Bachelard as they relate to the site and dream house in the transformation into abstract and concrete physical form.

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Judith N. Bookwalter
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For my mother and father
For Bill and for Tom
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Preface

All italicized quotes are from *The Poetics of Space*, by Gaston Bachelard
A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability.
Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*
If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.
the house's situation in the world . . . a variation of the metaphysically summarized situation of man in the world.

And so, faced with the bestial hostility of the storm and the hurricane, the house's virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues. The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body. It braces itself to receive the downpour, it girds its loins . . . such a house as this invites mankind to heroism of cosmic proportions. It is an instrument with which to confront the cosmos.
The house conquers its share of sky. It has the entire sky for its terrace.
There exists for each one of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond the real past. I called this oneiric house the crypt of the house that we were born in. Here we find ourselves at a pivotal point around which reciprocal interpretations of dreams through thought and thought through dreams, keep turning . . . It is on the plane of the daydream and not on that of facts that childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us.
The images I want to examine are the quite simple images of felicitous space. In this orientation, these investigations would deserve to be called topohilia. They seek to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love . . . we shall consider the images that attract..
I suspect that it is by studying the vernacular that we will eventually reach a comprehensive definition of landscape beauty. The older I grow and the longer I look at landscapes and seek to understand them, the more convinced I am that their beauty is not simply an aspect but their very essence and that that beauty derives from the human presence. For far too long, we have told ourselves that the beauty of a landscape was the expression of some transcendent law: the conformity to certain universal esthetic principles or the conformity to certain biological or ecological laws. But this is true only of formal or planned political landscapes. The beauty that we see in the vernacular landscape is the image of our common humanity: hard work, stubborn hope, and mutual forbearance striving to be love. I believe that a landscape which makes these qualities manifest is one that can be called beautiful.

J. B. Jackson, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape
The Islands of Maine
So long as rural life can withstand the blight of urbanization, there will be women who must improvise and men who must know a dozen skills to meet the challenges of each day; and there will be tinkerers, devisers, menders and reusers. And there will be attics, barns and sheds in which to gather the accumulations of the past; for like the storyteller's tales, this is the stuff of continuity, too good to be thrown away, too rich to be forgotten."

Lew Dietz, Night Train at Wiscasset Station

For centuries, Maine has stood in the position of the outsider, a vantage ground that afforded a detached and contemplative view of the surrounding world. Understandably, Maine people have yet to be convinced that this new world offers something better than the old.

Lew Dietz, Night Train at Wiscasset Station
Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.
In the final analysis, the Maine character has been shaped by the conditions and the imperatives of the harsh habitat in which its people have lived and endured.

Lew Dietz, *Night Train at Wiscasset Station*
When two strange images meet . . . they apparently strengthen each other.
"Anyone who has had an experience of mystery knows that there is a dimension of the universe that is not that which is available to his senses. There is a pertinent saying in one of the Upanishads: "When before the beauty of a sunset or of a mountain you pause and exclaim, 'Ah,' you are participating in divinity." Such a moment of participation involves a realization of the wonder and sheer beauty of existence. People living in the world of nature experience such moments every day. They live in the recognition of something there that is much greater than the human dimension."

Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*
From Portland on up, the Maine Coast is a complex of fingerlike peninsulas, estuaries and bays, of rocky headlands and islands that number in the thousands. The smallest of these islands are treeless, sometimes grass covered, rock ledges, inhabited by Savannah sparrows and sea birds. Where small islands reach a few acres in size, they are usually covered with a dense seemingly impenetrably thick growth of balsam firs and spruce. The larger islands with sheltered harbors which provide protection from storms - have supported fishing settlements for the last two hundred years.

These islands of Maine were once mountains which were part of the mainland continent millions of years ago. What are now Maine’s great bays - Machias, Frenchman’s. Blue Hill, Penobscot, Muscongus and Casco - were sweeping valleys before the Four Ice Ages. Ice thousands of feet thick covered the area forty thousand years ago. During the last continental glaciation, the weight of the ice depressed the land, and the sea level lowered more than one hundred feet as water which evaporated from the ocean was turned to ice.
A gradual melt began about thirteen to fifteen thousand years ago in which the land was flooded as the level of the ocean rose. The whole coastal area of Maine, including the islands and the many fingerlike peninsulas, is geologically referred to as drowned land.
The island is not a good place for a neighborhood of smart and fine suburban residences such as many prefer to pass their summers in... Villas and cottages of the class in question would appear out of place, tawdry, and vulgar upon it. Lawns and gardens appropriate to them are in large parts of the island out of the question. Notions of improving the island based on what has generally been attempted at many public favored places of summer resort should therefore be wholly abandoned.

Frederick Law Olmsted, *Report and Advice of Frederick Law Olmsted, for the Development and Improvement of Cushings Island, Maine* (Brookline, Mass., 1883)
Vinalhaven Island
Thirteen miles off the coast of Rockland, Vinalhaven Island is the largest of a group of islands in the Penobscot Bay known as the Fox Islands. About five miles wide and seven miles long, it is so penetrated by ocean that no point on the island is more than one mile from salt water. Most of Vinalhaven Island is granite which is well exposed in the abandoned granite quarries and at Carvers Harbor.

One thousand two hundred eleven people live year round on the island, which considers itself "the center of the greatest lobster producing region in the world," with a lobster fleet of over two hundred boats, each possibly hauling a hundred, two hundred or more traps per day.

One hundred years ago Vinalhaven was known for its granite. Fifteen hundred men worked in the quarries which produced granite for buildings in cities as large as Washington and New York. The granite was shipped on cargo vessels which docked in Carver's Harbor. Now the abandoned quarries, fed with spring water, have become swimming holes; until a few years ago
when the use of soap was prohibited, people went to the quarries to wash themselves in the summer.

Fifteen years ago, I acquired a piece of property on the coast of Vinalhaven Island. I have spent little time there through the years. It has become somewhat of a ritual to go there every few years. The drive to Rockland, getting on the ferry to Carver's Harbor, spending the one hour and eighteen minute ferry trip leaving the everyday world behind in anticipation - all are steps in ritualistic preparation for arrival in a place where evidence of the technology with which we measure time is limited to a few satellite dishes by a few houses in the village. There is not much else that tells the visitor it is 1991. There are a number of paved roads, one restaurant open year round, one more open in the summer, at least one all purpose sundry store, two groceries, one hardware, 2 or more ice cream/sandwich stands, and two bed and breakfasts open in the summer.

Although away from the village of Carver's Harbor there are some fancy summer houses, they are kept well hidden.

Most houses on the island have a seemingly tenuous connection to the ground, and most look as if they have survived a significant amount of
Maine weather, and, chances are, will survive a great deal more, although one might sometimes wonder how. The overwhelming power and timelessness of the landscape, the rocks, the sea and the apparent tenuous fragility of many of the buildings seem to reinforce each other in a way that speaks to me poetically.
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The Site
The site is a twenty-two acre parcel of land that stretches across a fingerlike peninsula of land on the northwestern part of the island. One side faces the open, sometimes, treacherous, water of Penobscot Bay, and the entrance to the Fox Island Thoroughfare. The other side of the property faces the protected water of Crockett’s Cove. The Penobscot Bay side is mostly rolling, open fern meadow with wild berries and occasional large spruce. Great rocks at the water’s edge form steps into the sea. There is a heightened awareness of light and sound. The surface of the rocks provides a plate where seagulls eat crab and shellfish, leaving the structural remains to turn into chalk white remnants of moments on shore; visits to the rocks are punctuated by the discovery of these ghostly aggregations.
Crockett River Road
The landscape has different ways of giving in to the visitor.
THE EDGE  at high tide

The cosmos molds mankind, ... it can transform a man of the hills into a man of islands
Restored to the powers of the imagination, and invested with our inner space, trees accompany us in an emulation of grandeur.
The rocks
from the depths of the earth
extracted,
a timeless link
to a cosmic order.
The daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity.
THE EDGE LOOKING SOUTH at low tide
The rocks
forms
of great animals resting
VIEW THROUGH THE TREES

LOOKING EAST FROM THE EDGE
Images of the Landscape - A Journey to the Sea
4.1

Crockett River Road
cuts the peninsula in half, longwise, on the
way to the point at the end.
It permits us
no hint
of what lies beyond
its wooded edge.
4.2

through spruce-dim woods
opening in a blaze
of near
blinding light
4.3

to meadow (and thicker woods beyond).
Yielding ferns underfoot
form the memory
of a path.
Ribs of vegetation
resisting penetration.
Pushing limbs forward,
Snapping back behind.
The sea smell,
the feel of the air
- anticipation.
First glimpse allowed through half-reluctant branches. It is there Always. Cool Powerful Sea.
There is less soil
and their hold to the earth
is more tenuous,
but the spruce grow healthier
by the sea.
Are they too participating
its grandeur?
At night
the hermit moon
lights the now quiet landscape.
4.8

A house that is
rock
and trees
and sky for canopy.
Windows on the Site - Box Explorations

The house's welcome is so genuine that even what may be seen from the windows belongs to it.
The body of the mountain hesitates
before my window:
'How can one enter if one is the
mountain,
If one is tall, with boulders and stones,
A piece of Earth, altered by Sky?'
Jules Supervielle, *Les amis inconnus*
as quoted by Bachelard
A Window in the Sky
For the world is a nest, and an immense power holds the inhabitants of the world in this nest.
the house is a large cradle

the hut and the light that keeps vigil on the far horizon . . . the concentration of intimacy in the refuge
The germ of daydream contained in the gently closed box.
House Explorations
I propose to consider the imagination as a major power of human nature . . . By the swiftness of its actions, the imagination separates us from the past as well as from reality; it faces the future. To the function of reality, wise in experience of the past, as it is defined by traditional psychology, should be added a function of unreality, which is equally positive . . . Any weakness in the function of unreality, will hamper the productive psyche.
'A house where I go alone calling a name
that silence and the walls give back to me
A strange house contained in my voice
Inhabited by the wind
I invent it, my hands draw a cloud
A heaven-bound ship above the forests
Mist that scatters and disappears
As in the play of images.'

Pierre Seghers, Le domaine public from
Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space
as quoted by Bachelard

The more concentrated the repose, the more
hermetic the chrysalis, the more the being that
emerges from it is a being from elsewhere, the
greater is his expansion.
centers of condensation of intimacy
For the real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams, the houses that are rich in unalterable oneirism, do not readily lend themselves to description... the oneirically definitive house, must retain its shadows.
Of course, thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated.
To bring order into these images, I believe that we should consider two principal connecting themes: 1) A house is imagined as a vertical being. It rises upward. It differentiates itself in terms of its verticality. It is one of the appeals to our consciousness of verticality. 2) A house is imagined as a concentrated being. It appeals to our consciousness of centrality.
Dual vertical polarity . . . space that is polarized by the cellar and the attic.
The underworld.
The cellar
becomes the rocky underneath,
a world in shadow of lichen and sometimes
brightly colored fungi.
There is a lamp hanging
on a hook on the post
I put my hand on when I enter.

In our civilization, which has the same
light everywhere, and puts electricity in its cellars,
we no longer go to the cellar carrying a candle. But
the unconsciousness cannot be civilized. It takes a
candle when it goes to the cellar.
It is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths ... darkness prevails both day and night ... we see shadows.
Our soul is an abode . . . the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them.
Photograph by Minor White
There exists for each one of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond the real past. I called this oneiric house the crypt of the house that we were born in. Here we find ourselves at a pivotal point around which reciprocal interpretations of dreams through thought and thought through dreams, keep turning . . . It is on the plane of the daydream and not on that of facts that childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us.
The house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting...more than an embodiment of home it is also an embodiment of dreams. Each one of its nooks and corners was a resting-place for daydreaming. And often the resting place particularized the daydream.
A roof tells its raison d'etre right away: it gives mankind shelter. . . up near the roof all our thoughts are clear.
If I were the architect of an oneiric house, I should hesitate between a three-story house and one with four. A three-story house, which is the simplest as regards essential height has a cellar, a ground floor an attic; while a four-story house puts a floor between the ground floor and the attic. One floor more, and our dreams become blurred. In the oneiric house, topoanalysis only knows how to count to three or four.
The attic
becomes the extension
of dreams.
we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic . . .
these retreats have the value of a shell.
[The human being] knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative . . .
Inside the house everything may be differentiated and multiplied.
The rocks become the stairs

At times, a few steps have engraved in our memories a slight difference of level that existed in our childhood home.

Centers of boredom, centers of solitude, centers of daydream group together to constitute the oneiric house.
Indeed, everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate.
We must first look for centers of simplicity in houses with many rooms. For as Baudelaire said in a palace, 'there is no place for intimacy.' But simplicity, which at times is too rationally vaunted, is not a source of high-powered oneirism. We must therefore experience the primitiveness of refuge and, beyond situations that have been experienced, discover situations that have been dreamed... a dreamer of refuges dreams of a hut, of a nest, or of nooks and corners in which he would like to hide away, like an animal in its hole.
The center,
a place between
inside and outside
where dualities
can be experienced.
The "skeletal house" is screened.
Enclosures within provide
nooks and corners,
and a greater degree of shelter.
The word chrysalis alone is an unmistakable indication that here two dreams are joined together, dreams that bespeak both repose and light of being, evening's crystallization and wings that open to the light. In the body of the winged manor, which dominates both town and sea, man and the universe, he retained a cottage chrysalis in order to be able to hide alone, in complete repose.
Something closed must retain our memories.
The poetic image is essentially variational, and not, as in the case of the concept, constitutive.
Afterward

The house . . . the framework for an interminable dream.

The process of concretizing a "dream house" for oneself from images that exist in memory, and in the imagination is perhaps one in which the process is more rewarding than the completion of the process, perhaps better hoped for than realized. In legend there lies in the fulfillment of dreams the possibility of the destruction of the thing most meaningful. In this project, the meaningful thing is the site, and my feelings for and about the site. Dreams are an essential and inevitable part of human experience - perhaps they are meant to be that way - dreams, interminable dreams.
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Bibliography, cont’d


