Defining Place:
Giving Form to Crossings in a Small Town Waterfront Community

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fig. 1. Pier remnants, Keyport, NJ

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ABSTRACT

How do you define a place? This thesis has been an exploration in giving form to the many forces which come together and give a place a particular character. It is about providing an alternative to the usual public place markers of civic monuments such as town halls and churches, and instead allowing the architectural form to grow out of the existing forces. These forces are in constant interaction with each other and the world around them: public and private, water and land, new and old, interior and exterior, movement, light and use. I have set out to develop those zones shared by these things crossing over one another, focusing primarily on the building edges where public and private intersect.
unselfish devotion, unwavering support, patience, love
for being my sunshine

love and support without limits
the source of my strength

true dedication to teaching,
always sharing your sensitivity to designing for people

my mentor who often knows me better than I know myself,
your lessons which reach far beyond the confines of this thesis

clarity and inspiration in your comments

history, friendship, a shared love for the coast
for showing me the way to Keyport

patience, endurance, laughter, friendship

last minute assistance and timely desk crits

... thank you

mom, dad, alida

jan

shun

ann

susan

suzanna

linda

ching yi

becky

all who helped from shun's level ii studio,
fig. 4. Front Street, 1898
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fig.5. Front Street, 1998
I was born and raised in New Jersey, but until last January had never come upon this place. The town of Keyport, New Jersey and its water's edge, unfolded before me as we drove up and over the hill of Broad Street. This place was for the most part unmarked, yet somehow I was immediately drawn to its charm. I knew this would be the site for my thesis. It contains in its location, history and use, all of the ingredients which, pulled together offer everything needed to make a place.

How do you define a place? This thesis has been an exploration in giving form to the many forces which come together and give a place a particular character. It is about providing an alternative to the usual public place markers of civic monuments such as town halls and churches, and instead, allowing the architectural form to grow out of the existing forces.
These forces which I refer to are in constant interaction with each other and the world around them:

- public and private
- water and land
- new and old
- interior and exterior
- movement
- light
- use

I have set out to develop those zones shared by these things crossing over one another, looking at all scales at which this interaction occurs, yet focusing primarily on the building edges where public and private intersect.

fig.7. Broad Street looking North, 1905
Keyport, New Jersey is a small town once known for its steamboat building industry and its oyster farming. Its history can be traced back to around 1664, when it was known as Chingarora, or "Fishing Point", a place frequented by the Lenni Lenape Indians. Its current name was given around 1830 when a dock and storehouse company was founded. (Timothy Regan, Keyport)

The town is situated at the fringe of the industry which surrounds New York City. It is part of the waterfront where the Atlantic Ocean juts into the land and becomes Raritan Bay. One can see the Manhattan skyline off in the distance. But there doesn't seem to be any declared heart to this place. Front Street, busy with antique shops and deli, acts as the town's center, but there is no clear identity of place.
Like most waterfront communities along the Jersey Shore, Keyport also has a rich history related to its waterfront. Located only 22 miles from New York City, throughout its history Keyport had a trade route, utilizing its Luppatacong and Matawan Creeks to bring goods further inland.

fig. 9. Map of Keyport, 1873

fig. 10. Manhattan skyline from site
From the early 1700’s until 1925, oyster harvesting provided employment for many in the town. At its peak, when the J. and J.W. Ellsworth Co. was operating in Keyport, there were approximately 300 men employed in the oyster industry in Keyport.

Through the 1800’s steamboat building was a main industry for the community of Keyport, and today its marinas still continue to bring some of the bay’s business into Keyport.

Aside from its industry, the townspeople have always made use of the waterfront for fishing and crabbing, including a small dock which takes deep sea fishing trips through the summer months. It is a community which takes pride in its festivals and town-wide tag sales, making
use of whatever open outdoor space is available to come together and share in various events. An empty lot along Front Street is terraced and landscaped to accommodate a stage and benches. It is called the 'bandstand', and it is the destination of town parades. It seems unfortunate that this area considered to be the punctuation mark for the town's activities is located only through signage and a flagpole.
The town has placed park benches along the tree lined main streets, but there is no real place where the public might claim as their own. A place to gather and wait for friends, or relax and enjoy the fresh air, view and sunlight. The elderly spend their afternoons drinking coffee inside the deli, while the teenagers of the community go to the local auto tune-up shop to hang around.

It seemed appropriate then, to choose a site within this town which contained all the necessary ingredients making up its inherent identity, and then form an architecture and a program which would enhance that identity and place, and offer it back to the community.
The site I chose is the area between the water's edge and Front Street, between Broad Street and the area called the 'bandstand'. Currently the site is an open dirt parking lot. The buildings which line the North side of Front Street have their backs turned to the site, some with appendages of wood decking, others with no windows at all. The narrow alleyway which sneaks between the existing buildings currently holds the trash of the businesses within, but the stream of sunshine forcing its way through the fence offers hope that there is more to this site than is yet being utilized.
fig. 22. Initial site organization model, 1" = 100'

fig. 23. Process concept model, 1" = 100'

fig. 24. Process concept model, 1" = 100'

fig. 25. Concept considerations
Concept

Early on in this exploration, an attitude was taken with regards to the overall site organization. If the basis of this thesis was to make a place where all of these forces cross over one another, then there needed to be a way to signify that interaction at the site scale. This interaction would be embodied by the simultaneity of something connecting and separating. The connection would be situated at the location of one of many paths across the site, probably the most prominent, leading from the most active of the existing areas, Front Street, down to a ferry pier at the water’s edge. This path, then, would link old and new, land and water, and symbolically, New York City and a small-town New Jersey community.

fig. 26-29. Process concept sketches
The separation portion of the interaction would run parallel to the water’s edge as well as to Front Street, and would lie between these two edges. Whatever form this would take in the end, it would play the role of separating the identity of land and water, old and new, private and public.

Both would provide a new edge to the community’s open space, and therefore a more precise definition of that space for the public to orient themselves and identify with.

Given this attitude and resulting conceptual intervention on the site, the forces of the site itself were then looked at to determine how they would in turn influence the form of this initial intervention.
These site forces included the following:

- the size and scale of the open area, and how the built forms might shape that open territory
- the directionality of the coastline, and the natural power of its continuity
- the paths and patterns of movement of the people using the space
- the paths and patterns of sunlight which would fall onto the ground and into windows
- the scale of the existing buildings, in height as well as bay spacing and lot sizes
- the possibilities for uses, taking into account its existing uses, what it might be lacking, what potential uses could add new life without undermining the existing
The form which resulted from examining these forces was a manipulated form of the original intervention. The larger landscape of the coastline and the existing lot lines deteriorated the pure diagram of connecting and separating until they began to disintegrate back into the landscape. The strength of the water and the continuity of the coastline instigated the shift in the grid from that of the existing town towards a diagonal more in line with the water’s edge.

The potential for uses then guided the overall organization of the site, as well as the size and scale of the proposed built forms. The existing and potential paths and patterns of movement of people as well as sunlight, then molded these forms and suggested entries, thresholds, vocabulary and materials.
Program

The proposal for the site is for mixed use, especially rich in community activities. This mix in use should promote an overlap in use and users, as well as in the physical crossings. Uses would include the following:

1. artist loft space
   - gallery
   - workspace, teaching space
2. offices
3. retail, market shops
4. ferry information, ticket pavilion
5. steamboat museum
6. residential
7. daycare
8. teen center
9. resident meeting space
10. viewing platform
11. parking
12. ferry

fig. 36. Ground Plan
While each use was carefully considered as to its appropriateness in this community and as part of this mix of uses, the specific uses are not so important to this exploration as is the assumption that there is a particular shell space which is primarily private. These private uses are then one side of a gradient between public and private, with this exploration trying to better define (both physically and through identity making) the zone shared by both.

fig. 37. Process sketch of site diagram
Without resorting to a time tested monument to mark identity of place, blatant symbols or merchandise which is a current trend to draw people into a site, there must be a way to express the inherent character of a place in the architectural form. The character to which I refer is an essence of a place, that which gives a particular place an attraction. It can be natural or the result of human interaction with the surroundings, but many will be drawn to a place with character with or without the help of design. Perhaps with design, and an enriching of the inherent qualities, more people can be drawn towards it, making it a more active, safe place to be.

fig. 38. Point Pleasant Beach, 1972
Examples of this character include:

This place along a path holds an identity of place at many scales. Your foot goes on the stone step as you move into the shop. There is a seat to rest at overlooking the street from which you just came. Occupants have a window from above looking out over the public thoroughfare. The entry shares the space of the upper floor, the lower shop, the front terrace and the street. It is an eroded corner which overlaps and shares interior and exterior. The roofs and canopies enhance all the various scales, bringing them together as one, yet dividing their own territories. The hills beyond are an inextricable part of this place as well.

fig. 39. Kyoto, Japan
Man's attempt to inhabit this vast water: In a way, fragile compared to the awesome strength of the water into which it steps. It is sturdy, allowing you to step out over the lapping surface, just a little closer to the fresh smell, just a little further from the bustling community from which these wooden planks extend.

The vastness of the ocean as experienced from a beach. Its power and yet its calm and peace, standing at the edge of the earth, with this seemingly endless dark abyss before you.
Standing under this roof, you are at once part of the area of the platform, and part of the view before you. The scale of the roof responds to the scale of the view, allowing the vista to flow in and under it and amongst the columns which surround you.

fig. 42. Kyomizu, Japan
There is an edge here in front of some open space. It provides the opportunity for raising temporary structures here, allowing the community to transform the area from street and parking into a marketplace of fresh fruits and vegetables.
ground level changes which allow a place to simultaneously be its own space while also part of another structure and enclosure which fulfill primary functions but also accommodate sitting or resting places, path guides, or area demarcations.

sheltered public space which shares some spatial qualities of both its interior and exterior adjacent spaces.

fig. 45. Crabbing Dock Point Pleasant, NJ

fig. 46. Faneuil Hall Marketplace: Boston, MA
Clearly there is a front and back side to these buildings. Along the waterfront of Savannah, these old warehouses have a taut facade which faces the street and automobile traffic, and a pedestrian edge which is clearly a different scale. The larger framework of the warehouses sets the stage for the variety of storefronts along this edge. Each picks up on the signage height and perpendicular angle, the doorway and awning height and sitting heights, but in their own vocabulary and materials. There is a unique tenant identity within a larger overall clarity.
Inside this space, you are part of a building, but you are part of a city. You are walking through someone else’s space, but you are on the street. There are hints of the history of this culture you are in, but this is very much a contemporary building. Layers between interior and exterior achieve the experience of shared identity. Simultaneity is achieved in this space.

The outside comes right in. The structure and enclosure are cagelike and somewhat transparent, but you are aware that you are within, looking outward.
The ability to see passing light, for its own sake, the patterns it can create, the warmth of the sun, the attention it brings to the surfaces on which it falls.
Areas within the Site

From the regional scale to the human scale, there is a particular character to every place which can be brought out and enhanced by architectural form. At the regional scale, it is a waterfront community, but more specifically, it is part of a continuity of the Jersey Shore. The town of Keyport brings its own identity to the site as would each of the uses within the proposed program. Each public area within the site might be distinct in character, yet could share similar aspects of a vocabulary of built form with other areas of the site, offering a richness as well as continuity to the site as a whole.

fig. 52. Site model, $1'' = 32'$
These separate areas include the following:

1. Front Street Marquis
2. Gallery
3. Office Building
4. Open Air Passage
5. Retail Shops
6. Farmers' Market
7. Flea Market
8. Ferry Pavilion
9. Ferry Pier
10. Community Plaza

fig. 53. Plan
fig. 54-60. Partial plans of areas on following pages, 1" = 64'
announces one of the entries into the site from Front Street.

1. front street marquis

link between art lofts and the community, offers an opportunity for displaying work, as well as a larger space to facilitate community workshops or youth classes in various arts.

2. art gallery
While this node would serve as the primary entrance for the offices as well as the restaurant and retail, it is also a passageway from the parking off Broad Street into the plaza. It is immediately adjacent to the museum and its entry, and could be used for smaller outdoor community functions which might require minimum shelter from the environment.

Shops located along the primary pedestrian path leading to the ferry pier are smaller in scale to facilitate access to merchandise by commuters and visitors.

A destination for workers from both the existing community as well as those arriving from the ferry, office units would have views of both the plaza as well as the Manhattan skyline.
First floor retail and upper floor offices provide the backdrop and anchor for temporary activities. Lamp posts, banner posts and street furniture play a dual role by providing the infrastructure to support market stalls and their shelters.

Shared by the daycare, teen center and resident meeting house, this area would be raised slightly from the rest of the open space to differentiate between the two areas as more private.
A familiar site to anyone who knows the Jersey Shore is people sitting in their cars during the winter, gazing over the open water. This open space could also be utilized by the townspeople for another favorite activity, tag sales.

ticket sales, information about ferry schedules, and enclosed waiting area with a waterfront view

long enough to reach the channel depths, straight and for the most part unadorned, to allow visitors and commuters as much visual and other sensory access to the water as possible.
fig. 61. Front Street
Vocabulary

Certain vocabulary would be found throughout the site to provide a continuity of identity, familiar scales, materials and forms which allow someone to orient themselves without specific signage. This vocabulary has been extracted from the existing context at all scales in reference to the forces from which this place has gained its identity. From rhythms of structural members traditionally used in fishing piers, and the vernacular of canopies and shutters of the Jersey Shore, to the skeletal and fleeting structures of carnivals and amusement parks, each member of the vocabulary offers another opportunity to link back to the surrounding region, site and lifestyle.

fig. 62. Ocean Grove Fishing Pier

fig. 63. Convention Hall, Asbury Park, NJ
reference to amusements of the Jersey Shore, roller coasters, ferris wheels, temporary structures

This vocabulary includes:

material:

fig. 64. Amusements in Keansburg, NJ

glass:

where appropriate to take advantage of sunlight and views of the plaza, the water and the skyline across the bay.

fig. 65. Kindergarten, Freiburg Germany
In an effort to refer back to the existing site, rather than just picking up on structural bay rhythms already established on the site, a combined structural system of walls and columns was used. With reference to the existing buildings' load bearing walls as well as the pier's pilons, each system works its way from Front Street and the land towards the water, and from the water towards the street and land respectively. The closer each system is towards the other's origin, the more it acts structurally and in form like the other. As the columns get closer towards the street, they are more linear and become wall like. As the walls get closer towards the water, they become more fragmented and resemble more and more a field of columns.
shelter:

At any waterfront location, there is always a multitude of forms providing shelter in some way. In keeping with some of the forms commonly found along the Jersey Shore, each area within the site is always sheltered in some way from the elements, precipitation as well as sunlight.

In each case, there is a canopy, arcade, light screen or privacy screen, each with some scale resemblance to the overall use of these sheltering devices as well as similarity in the materials used to construct them. In most cases they are lightweight frames with translucent material like glass or mesh wire, and are usually operable by the occupants to account for climate changes year round.
In a few cases the more permeable materials could be replaced by more weather tight materials to account for the inclement seasons.

fig.69. Plaza Mayor, Madrid, Spain

fig.70. Storefront mezzanine, Pittsburgh, PA
dimensions:

height
2 feet: sitting ledges, benches, column bases
3 feet: railings, resting / leaning
8 feet: human, entry
12 feet: retail, entry zone

bay spacing
10 foot and 20 foot rhythm of bays, picks up pilion spacing of the ferry pier, but is also similar to the bay spacing of the existing fabric of load bearing walls

fig. 71. Hertzberger's Apollo School

fig. 72. Fire destruction, Broad St., 1877
asphalt paving:

The areas of the site are also tied together through the ground treatment and paving materials. Ground materials overlap where possible to further link the different locations within the site. While only the ferry pier itself actually overlaps with the water, the water is considered to be an important factor of the ground level. It is adjacent to either sand or boardwalk, which is typical of all of the shoreline in New Jersey. Where the boardwalk and the sand leave off, brick paving begins, linking the existing town to its new development, and land to water. Accents in stone throughout the brick paving highlight use areas and thresholds of interior uses. More private outdoor areas are considered to be grass in keeping with the yards of the existing community neighborhoods.

fig. 73. Ground plan
fig. 74. Final model, 1/8"=1·0"
Synthesis

This has been an exploration in making the many parts work together to make a whole. Each piece playing its part to help form the identity of this place. The separate parts have been outlined in the previous pages. What follows is an attempt to synthesize those categories towards a stronger identity for this site.

fig.75. Final model, 1/8"=1'-0"
tight path squeezes you towards the open plaza ahead, while the marquis transforms into a light canopy, continuing the shelter height of the rest of the edge.

vocabulary of rest of site turns corner, as street life + plaza activity spill into each other.

peeling back of corner, allowing light to penetrate, this retail shop now claims both street + alley edge.

located off center on Front Street, this plaza path allows the activity to spill out onto the street, rather than guide it to a precise destination which would funnel life away from the existing community.
Marquis and Entry from Front Street

figs. 76-80.
balconies of lofts overlook path below

arcade with operable canopies extend gallery out into the public path

glass enclosure + level change promote viewing from public path inward to exhibits

collonade carries rhythm of ferry pilons up towards Front Street

second gallery entry angled in reference to ferry pier and waterfront, welcoming public to walk through gallery as well as under arcade
Artist Lofts and Gallery

figs. 81-85.
translucent screens let light in and views out, while their larger surface area responds to the larger plaza adjacent to it.

larger framework allows variety in identities along the storefront edge.

the angle of the ferry pier climbs all the way from the water's edge to these retail shops, in contrast to the offices orthogonal to the street.

just short of a view to the water, this angle ties the life of the street into the reference of the water, reminding those who stroll along this path of the duality of this site’s identity.

figs.86-91.
Office and Retail
skeletal trusses float above, supporting light canopies which provide some shelter from the elements.

tall height in proportion to its square footage in response to the vast space around it, and to welcome the public through it.

summer breezes cool this shaded area, making it an ideal location to linger, or for community members to utilize.

path continues between the open air passage and the museum - narrowing and then expanding again, a gateway between plaza and ferry landing providing another layer between land and water.

entry to the museum located adjacent to the juncture between land, water, automobile and pedestrian.

the low silhouette of its built form offers choice along a path, while minimally influencing the boundaries of the vast space it is situated in.
Open Air Passage, Steamboat Museum

figs. 92-98.
destination at the end of main town access, Broad Street

double sided small retail shops

street lamps also provide infrastructure for temporary stands

evel change to beach allows view over water from parking area

access to beach

figs. 99-103.
Flea Market and Parking
Operable screens allow flexibility in light and ventilation.

Depth from tenant enclosure to screen plane provides shared area of public and private.

Lower level operable screens transform to canopies to extend shop territory out into public path.

Paving material shifts from brick to boardwalk to transition towards ferry pier and beach.

Figs. 104-109.
Retail and Ferry Landing
pavilion extends out from lower level of retail building becoming wider and lower in relationship to the horizontality of the water, and direction of the coastline.

structure here is entirely columns in reference to pilons from the pier.

screens pivot open in summer months to allow breezes into pavilion, and more views out onto the water.

regularity of structural bays continues in ferry pier pilon spacing, carrying continuity of site all the way to ferry dock.

beach extends under pier and wraps into site, a reminder of the site's identity, and the endless coastline it is part of.

figs. 110-114
Ferry Pier and Pavilion
figs. 115. Sketch of Market Lamp

figs. 116. Sketch of Market area
Farmer’s Market

Similar to the flea market and parking area at the northernmost area of the site, this open space would provide the framework for selling booths. This would allow current site activities to continue, supporting the continuation of community uses.

Lamp posts would accommodate temporary structures for markets, and their bases would provide supports for horizontal surfaces, or as sitting areas when the markets were not operating.

The positioning of these posts would simultaneously suggest a defined area to help identify the marketplace, while maintaining a sparseness to permit the whole area to be inclusive rather than divisive. Stone accents in the brick paving would highlight the marketplace area more subtly than differentiating the entire area with an alternate ground cover.

figs. 117-120.
Viewing Platform and Residential

While this area was treated only peripherally to the more public areas of the site, it was an important ingredient to the whole.

The reality of this community is the proximity of its commercial and residential properties. Providing some residential space would assist in fulfilling the level of activity proposed for this mixed use development, as well as enhance the neighborly characteristics inherent in the site.
The coastline is powerful. It is not something to be crossed over lightly, but rather should be taken into account when deciding how to cross it - where is its edge, really? It depends on the scale which you refer to, so this site has been developed in layers which overlap.

- from water to land, but really water to pier and pier to land
- from plaza to passage, shared by the farmer's market, and wherever it might define its boundaries from week to week
- from passage back to existing street where the marquis turns the corner layering the identity of the plaza back into the existing street continuing the intention of sharing and overlapping.

figs. 124-127.
Meeting the Water’s Edge
figs. 128. Broad Street, Keyport
Conclusion

There will always be a need for public places. Places to take a brisk walk, to sit and have lunch on a sunny day, to collect your thoughts - large open spaces for children to play, while adults watch over them.

We are at a time when technology offers us many conveniences, but for all its advances, it can not change the basic needs of being human. People at all ages need contact with nature. Nature being as simple as sunlight or outdoor air. People also need contact with other people, and children need room to run and play safely within range of supervision. So there will always be a need for places for the public to go.

How these places are designed and consequently defined will most certainly influence the quality of the space and therefore the quality of the experience there.

This thesis began as an attempt to define a place through the built definition of its edges. In struggling to find the basis for that definition, it became an exploration in the development of edge forms as the manifestation of the attributes inherent in a site.

These attributes were considered in the form of forces:

- public vs. private
- water vs. land
- new vs. old
- interior vs. exterior
- movement vs. stillness
- light vs. shadow
- use vs. emptiness
These forces may appear generic, but they are enduring. Regardless of program, inhabitation, or lack thereof, these forces will remain, interacting and overlapping each other. They can be applied to most any probable site for public place development. At their intersection, where these forces cross, a place is defined.

It is not any one particular force or attribute from this site which will provide its identity or success, nor can it be solely something transplanted from the mind of a designer. Only through a balance between all of the forces acting on the site can a healthy public place be achieved and maintained. Through a built form which acknowledges and embraces the intersection of these forces, this balance and therefore healthy public place can be realized.

In the same spirit of finding a balance between forces acting on the site, the way in which a design of a place is approached must also balance all scales. By this, reference is being made to the ever present struggle between the larger scale issues of urban planning, and the smaller foci of architectural design.

It is apparent that the design and development of an identity of a place is interwoven in both disciplines, and so should be approached through a common domain between the two disciplines. While this brings up its own share of conflicts, it is only through this shared view that all aspects of a place identity can truly be explored.

Like the delicate balance of the identity of the shared place between public and private, there is a place for a balance in design between architecture and planning.
In the case of Keyport, New Jersey, an attempt was made to explore its identity at many scales, from the viewpoint of someone trying to find that balance between architecture and planning. At all scales of its development, a definition was approached which referred back to the larger issues: its shared identity between the waterfront and the existing town, and between its proximity to New York City and its inextricable position as part of the Jersey Shore. While at the same time, attention was given in the exploration to see the relevance of the design to the people who would inhabit this environment. Light, movement and use were considered in terms of how they might enhance the experience of being in or next to these built forms. Gradients from public to private, water to land, new to old, interior to exterior, movement to stillness, light to shadow and use to emptiness were employed in building a zone of overlap. All of these forces crossing defined the identity of that zone, from the few feet directly surrounding someone in that space, to the site itself, to the region which the site is a part of.

The end result of this thesis was more than a proposal for a public place in a smalltown waterfront community in New Jersey. It also is more than the culmination of an education. It is the discovery of an approach towards design, which extends beyond the conventional boundaries of disciplines, suggesting the goals and principles for the future of a designer.

Like the overlapping zones which were being designed for Keyport, NJ, and the proposal to overlap the disciplines of architecture and planning, this thesis is simultaneously an end and a beginning.
Bibliography


Credits

All illustrations and photographs are by author unless otherwise noted.

Fig. 1, 4, 7. Timothy Regan, Images of America: Keyport
Fig. 9. Map. Keyport Public Library
Fig. 11, 12. Timothy Regan, Images of America: Keyport
Fig. 13. Henry Coo
Fig. 45. Lorraine Coo
Fig. 49. Maki + Associates, Space Design #20
Fig. 50, 65. Detail Magazine, January 1995
Fig. 71. Herman Hertzberger, Lessons for Students in Architecture
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Fig. 89. Maki + Associates, Space Design #20