The Architecture of Storytelling: 
Children's Shelter in Venice, California

by
Sandra Ventura
BA in Environmental Design, Otis Parsons School of Design 1988

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Signature of Author
Sandra Ventura, Department of Architecture
January 23, 1998

Certified By
Ann Pendleton-Jullian, Associate Professor of Architecture
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by
Roy Strickland, Associate Professor of Architecture
Chairperson, Departmental Committee of Graduate Students

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READERS

Fernando Domeyko-Perez, Senior Lecturer, M.I.T

Hasan Uddin-Kahn, Visiting Associate Professor, M.I.T.
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Abstract

The thesis investigation began with my experience with storytelling. Verbal stories told to me as a child provided a form of cultural continuity. Stories were a way of transferring culture, ideas, religion, morals, and values. The moral of the story changed depending on who was the storyteller. My mother's and later my sister's stories changed depending on my age and my ability to understand. No matter the age, narrative acted as a connection to culture, places, and family.

The thesis takes storytelling as an architectural agenda. This leads to the question, Can storytelling be experienced through architecture? The thesis explores the possibility of experiencing storytelling through physical form. The exploration focuses on the act of reading and recording of stories. Providing places for reading and recording is the starting point of the architectural investigation.

The program used to explore these issues is a children's shelter in Venice, California. A shelter for children who have been removed from their homes because of abuse, and or neglect. The shelter is a place were storytelling can be re-introduced into the children's lives, since their parents or storytellers are no longer with them.
table of contents

Abstract 3

Stories 7
Point of View
Imagination and Reality

Program and Storytelling 25
New Focus
Reading and Recording Stories
Existing Types

Architecture of the Ephemeral 43
The Physicalness of the Ephemeral

Site 51
Site history
Immediate Site

Studies 65
Wall, Bridge, and Storytellers Landscape
Threshold
Housing Studies

Proposal 89
Site
Plans
Sections
Model

Conclusion 127

Acknowledgments 129

Bibliography 131
Para Victoria, mi Amá, mi Apá, Aurelia, Felipe, y Sonia, por aguantarme y a Victoria por haber nacido.
stories
La niña y el tesoro
A little girl accidentally stumbled across the site of a buried treasure. An old woman realized this and pushed the young girl away. As the woman dug up the treasure, she discovered some bones she found buried in it. The bones took the form of a skeleton, which pursued her until her death.

sketch by Esther, 8 years old
La llorona was a beautiful woman who did not want her first child when it was born. She threw it into a stream and did so successively with her other three children as they were born. She died and as penance was ordered to gather up her abandoned children. She has not been able to find them. Consequently she wanders along streams at the edge of towns and in wooded places. Her hair is long and her dress reaches the ground. Many have heard her wailing: "O, my children!"

As a child mexican tales and legends provided me with a connection to places, memories, memories of places, and past experiences. There was a non-physical connection through the imagination to a physical place or experience. For example, the tale of "La Llorona" or wailing woman took me through the imagination to a place were I lived as a child. The story made the place crystal clear in my mind. The story took place in my memory of the old house and the landscape which surrounded our village. I can still see clearly the house, storage room, large tree, river, and the cotton fields in the back yard (see plan, facing page)

La llorona taught me to fear being a disobedient child, for I thought that if I was a disobedient child I would be confused by la llorona as one of her lost children. Whenever we walked by the river next to our house, my sisters, brother and I, we would run for our lives in order to avoid encountering the woman. We ran for shelter. La llorona was also thought to frequent a park or what we considered a dense forest. Being under the dense canopy of the trees frightened us, so we ran to the open space for protection. The landscape was a source of fear and protection. The feeling of protection in a room or in the landscape was very important for me as a child. What I feared or felt soothed by was partially based on stories. The story of la llorona is about obedience, the landscape, and in my case it was very much about the old house, the large tree, the fields and the river.

1. Robe L. Stanley, Mexican Tales and Legends from Veracruz, p.108
An interesting aspect of this story as well as the others is that the story changes depending on who is the storyteller. The point of view is very important to understand the lesson of the story. For example: When my mother told me the story of la llorona it changed. The reason why la llorona drowned her children was because she loved them. According to my mother's version this woman was a very poor indian woman who did not have enough food to feed her children. Out of despair and to avoid suffering she drowned them. She loved them so much that she had to kill them.

My older sister tells me of another version. According to her la llorona was an indian woman who had three mestizo children by a spaniard. The father wanted to take the children away from her, so she fled. She was being chased through the forest when she stopped by a river. The spaniard and other men chasing her were very close. While the mother and the children were hiding by the river, the children began to cry. In order to keep them quiet and not be noticed she submerged them under water. She wanted to keep them quiet, but ended up drowning them. This is version like the previous one deals with her despair and deep love for her children.

The first version was to instill fear and was told by the mother. The second again told by my mother but it was to show her children how great is a mother's love. The third was more about teaching me a piece of Mexico's history. Whatever the reason for the story, the story changed as the storyteller changed. The role of the storyteller and the audience is important and very different. When the story is told makes a great difference. The previous versions of la llorona were told by different people for different reasons. They were told to me differently due to my age. I grew up so the stories changed to suit a different purpose. Whoever the storyteller was, they had something valuable to share. Sharing the experience is sharing culture. It's a way of sharing who you are or could be. It's a marvelous way of expression.
My mother talks about an apparition of a saint by a large tree in the middle of the fields. I'm not sure what kind of fields, but I imagined a vast space in which this single tree sat. The saint's image appeared on the tree trunk and was first spotted by a peasant farmer. The neighboring towns heard of this incident and before any one knew it, crowds gathered around the tree's trunk. It was believed that if you approached the tree on your knees while praying your petition would be answered. Another interesting feature of the landscape was that the ground was all pebbles which made walking on your knees much more painful, yet the more you bled the more likely your prayer would be answered.

This type of veneration of walking on your knees was also common in churches. The believer would walk on his or her knees from the church entrance to the altar. This ritual was performed to approach any sacred site.

When we moved to the United States my family continued this ritual and we would occasionally walk into church on our knees if we had a particularly important favor to ask a saint. The church interior was similar to the churches in Mexico, they were larger or more lavish perhaps. The people were dressed differently, but the feeling of family, of mexican-ness was there. The people spoke the same language, they were the same skin color, had the same religious beliefs, and worshipped in the same space.

When it came to the landscape, it was very different. The church environment could be controlled more or less, but the landscape was very different. Our home was now an apartment buildings unlike our single family house in Mexico which sat in the middle of cotton and corn fields. Worshiping in the landscape was very different. I realized the difference when I was about fifteen years old. The story goes as follows: There was a problem with my aunt's pregnancy. Apparently the fetus was very ill and the doctors thought the baby would not survive. The family or the women in the immediate family decided that we (the older and younger women) would make a procession from one church
to another. The procession would not be on our knees, but the idea was similar. Our offering to the saint was the procession as a gift for a miracle, a miracle to save my aunt’s unborn child. The procession began at a church in Venice, California and ended at another church in south Los Angeles. The procession was long since the miracle being asked for was quite large. The places that I remember are the places where we stopped to have a drink (7-eleven), to shop (shopping center) and the elementary and high school which I attended.

It’s fascinating how the landscape changed, yet the rituals continued. In this case the pain of walking on your knees was replaced by the distance we walked.
It was a long time ago when a married man left his wife and children at home and went to the town dance. The dance is usually on saturday nights by the town kiosk. The family was poor, yet the husband went out to spend what little they had. On his way to the kiosk, he passed through a dark alley leading up a steep stairway where he encountered a young woman. The woman was very beautiful and charmed the man. He invited her to go with him to the dance and she accepted. They both went up the steep stairs, while the young woman walked up the stairs her skirt lifted up exposing her legs. Other passersby noticed that her legs were not human legs but those of a donkey. The man was not aware of this, so the couple proceeded to the dance. Upon arrival they began to dance to the rhythm of the local band. After dancing for a while, the man an others realized that the woman was not touching the ground but floating slightly above the dance floor.

This was always a scary story to me, because of the visual imagery. The dark alley leading to steep stairs, the donkey feet, and the floating woman. Now that I look back at this story I realize that it kept the memory of community life around the kiosk vivid. The story is about the townscape, community life, and family values.
The notion of imagination and reality reminds me of an essay by Susan Griffin entitled “Can Imagination Save Us?”. She relates an account of the surrealist poet Robert Desnos while in a nazi concentration camp. Desnos as well as other prisoners are being taken away from the camp to the gas chambers. Everyone on the truck knows where they are headed, so there is silence during the trip. Suddenly Robert Desnos interrupts the silence by grabbing one of the prisoner’s hand and begins to read the man’s palm.

“Oh, he says, I see you have a very long lifeline”.2

And he keeps reading other prisoner’s palms and even the SS guard’s palms. The excitement is contagious. Desno’s imagination has transformed the mood of everyone. No one, not even the SS guards can imagine any other future than the one Desno’s has just foretold. The guards cannot imagine going against this new future. The SS guards take the prisoners back to the camp and do not execute them. Desno’s imagination saved them from the gas chamber. Susan Griffin does mention however:

“One must be careful not to slide into denial. Imagination can so easily be trapped by the wish to escape painful facts and unbearable conclusions. The New Age idea that one can wish oneself out of any circumstance, disease, or bad fortune is not only sadly disrespectful toward suffering, it is also, in the end, dangerous if escape replaces awareness.”3

She continues by mentioning the opposite:

“But there are other dangers. What is called “realism” can lead to a kind of paralysis of action and a state of mind that has relinquished desire altogether.”4

2. Griffin, Susan., “Can the Imagination Save Us”, p.2
3. ibid, p.2
children at the Bienvenidos Shelter
She concludes by saying that what is needed is balance. A balance between imagination and reality.

The children's shelter could find that balance between the imagination and reality. Reality are the people, the site, and the community. On the other hand the imagination sees no boundaries, no limits. The limits are made by the individuals imagination.

"No one can stop us from imagining another kind of future" 5

4. ibid, p.2
5. ibid, p.3
program & storytelling
El Señor Pobre y la Muerte

A very poor man with a large family asks his wife to prepare a lunch for him so he could go and work on fields. He encounters a god and refuses to share the food with him because it is good who ought to give him and his family. He encounters the virgin and also demands her some food, for she will not intercede in his behalf to request God for his children. But when he encountered Death, he agrees to share his food, because Death is fair - treats all men equally.
children's shelter

The program is a children's shelter in Venice California. A shelter for children who have been removed from their homes because of abuse and/or neglect.

A shelter with a New Focus on Storytelling.

The shelter is long term, children will live in it until they have been placed in a foster home or permanent home. Because the shelter is long term, the children will not be transferred from shelter to shelter. Instead of being bounced around from place to place, the priority is to find a home. Most of the children will come from the Los Angeles County Area. A large number of these children will be minorities, like in most shelters in the region. This increase in numbers of minority children in shelters is due to the large number of immigrant families from Mexico, Central America and other countries who have made Los Angeles their home. Wherever the children are from, they will be received. The thing common to the children in the shelter is homelessness.

The population in the shelter will change depending on the immigrant population in the Venice / Los Angeles Area.
Storytelling time at the Los Angeles public library in downtown Los Angeles. Storyteller entertains children with tales. He changes voices and plays a drum to keep the children interested.
new focus - storytelling

The shelter takes two existing shelter types and adds a new focus.

The new focus is achieved with the introduction of Storytelling.

The two existing types are what I call type “A” and type “B”. Type “A” focuses on the children's psychological needs while type “B” satisfies basic physical needs (see pg.37-41 for more information on the two existing shelter types).

why is storytelling important to shelter?

- Perfect place to re-introduce storytelling and storytellers back to children
- Children can experience the “healing power of storytelling”, as pointed out by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot a noted professor at Harvard who studies the importance of storytelling in cultural and racial issues.
- As children tell their stories they express themselves.
- Learn about the other children in the shelter. Through sharing their stories they get to know the children as well as the caregivers and other adults in the shelter.
- Sharing your personal stories gives value to where you came from and where you are going. Stories are “an extraordinary vehicle for communion and communication and expression, and for the knowledge that we all need in order to know where we’re coming from and to help us to define where we’re going.”
- Stimulates the imagination. The imagination has no limit, it’s a great way of opening possibilities and seeing a way out of their situation.
- Through reading and recording of stories children interact

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Children at the Bienvenidos Shelter

Wall with children's drawings

School Zone, pg. 99

Child making hand print on wet concrete

School Zone, pg. 99
reading and recording stories

The thesis focuses on the act of Reading and Recording of stories. Reading and recording incites participation. As children participate they contribute part of themselves to the group. As children contribute they get a sense of belonging. It is a way of being part of something, as one is part of a family.

By *reading* their stories the children share something valuable that is their own and learn about others.

"Children should be encouraged to tell their stories, within their families, as well as in their communities and schools. These need to be legitimate activities of personal expression."

*Recording* stories through writing or drawing is a way of leaving something behind. It is a way of sharing part of yourself with children in the shelter now or with children that will come in the future. Children can draw on walls to make their presence known. In a similar way they can make hand prints on wet concrete (see facing images). What ever the method of writing or drawing it is about recording who they are.

Through reading and recording the children will learn about each other, while learning about themselves.

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The shelter's new focus is the basis for providing places for reading and recording stories. The major component of a place of this type is what I call the Storyteller's Landscape. This is a landscape where the children can enjoy storytelling through narrative or by writing / drawing on the landscape. Another element in the landscape is the storyteller's house. There will also be special reading rooms in the institution. What this landscape is shaped by is discussed in the next section.

See next section for details on storytelling places.
Interior of the Children's Institute International
1. storyteller's landscape
2. storytellers house and landscape
3. bridge
4. threshold
5. reading rooms (off of bridge)
6. pre-school (4 to 6 Years old)
   - classroom (10 children) = 2,200 sq.ft.
   - play area = 1,000 sq.ft.
   - quiet & noisy areas = 500 sq.ft.
   - total = 3,700 sq.ft.
7. kindergarten & elementary (6 to 12)
   - 2 classrooms (15 students each) = 2,200 sq.ft.
   - computer area = 200 sq.ft.
   - quiet & noisy areas = 3,000 sq.ft.
   - total = 5,400 sq.ft.
8. four dormitories
   (4 bedrooms per dormitory unit / total of 16 bedrooms
   (3 children per bedroom / total 48 children)
   - 1 bedroom (3 children) = 140 sq.ft. x 16 bedrooms = 2,240 sq.ft.
   - dining room/food prep. area = 450 sq.ft. x 4 = 1,800 sq.ft.
   - 2 WC's per dormitory = 224 sq.ft. x 4 = 896 sq.ft.
   - play area (supervised) = 360 sq.ft. x 4 = 1,440 sq.ft.
   - total for 1 dormitory = 1,594 sq.ft.
   - total for 4 dormitories = 6,376 sq.ft.
9. adult wing
   - staff rooms = 1,100 sq.ft.
   - visiting areas = 300 sq.ft.
   - therapy rooms = 600 sq.ft.
   - library = 1,500 sq.ft.
   - medical room = 400 sq.ft.
   - total = 6,800 sq.ft.

Total of building program = 19,400 sq.ft.
Bienvenidos Shelter floor plan of housing unit. There is a central node from which all four bedrooms can be supervised.
While in California, I visited two of the three emergency shelters in the Los Angeles area. I noticed two very different attitudes toward the management of the shelters. The Bienvenidos Shelter is what I have labeled type A shelter. Shelter type “A” is in a residential area. The general concern in the Shelter type “A” was the psychological needs of the children. This type of shelter separates children from their normal surroundings (neighborhood, school etc.). Although some separation is required for the children's safety, the complete alienation seemed severe. The shelter's design resembles a countryside with small cottages in the landscape. This approach to the architectural design seemed deceitful since most of the children in the Venice or Los Angeles area are poor and will not come from such a landscape. Not only do they not come from such places, it is very unlikely that they will live in such a place in the future. Type “A” shelter's focus on the children's psychological needs is important, however the shelters alienation seemed unrealistic and inappropriate.

Type “B” shelter is a place which focuses on the child's basic needs. The shelter of this type is the Children's Institute International. The shelter was set in the city, where most of the children come from. The setting seemed more appropriate than type “A”. Because the shelter was in the city, it was filled to maximum capacity. The need for shelters in the city was clear. The shelters need to be close to where the children live. If the shelters are in close proximity to their old neighborhoods, the children could perhaps keep attending the same school. This allows some continuity in their lives. After visiting these two shelter types I realized that type “A” shelter's focus on the psychological needs of the children is important as well as the placement in the city of type “B”. The ideal site for such a shelter would be in the city, where the children come from. A shelter in such a setting with the focus on the children's emotional well being seems to be the ideal.
Bienvenidos Shelter
Type A
Exterior and interior views
bienvenidos shelter / type a
Children's Institute International
Exterior and interior views (both pages)
children's institute international
shelter type b
architecture of the ephemeral
My Grandma and the Little Girl Saint

When my grandma was a little girl, she went to church with her mom. While everyone was praying, she saw a little girl by an alter smiling/crying. She looked at her. My grandma told her mom, 'What was the little girl doing there. What little girl?' her mom asked. Only my grandma saw her. Everyone in the church heard it and asked her where she saw the little girl. She pointed at the alter where she saw the young girl. They all prayed to it.

The story is more believable to the person who experienced it. There is a close resemblance in this case.

My grandmother

sketch by Xiomara Gonzales, 7 years old
Study model #1

Sketch
inside underground kiva-like structure
model #1 - study on the physical & the ephemeral

When the investigation began I was faced with the question, How to make architecture out of stories or the ephemeral?

The search began with a model I call “The physical and the ephemeral” (study model #1 - facing page). The investigation focused on how to define the ephemeral and the concrete. The ephemeral are the stories and the concrete is reality.

The materials used in the model were very straightforward or the obvious. The heavy plaster was used to represent the real or the concrete. The ephemeral was represented by the thin wire or the very transparent structure. The model was not very successful in that it represented the ephemeral and the concrete in a conventional way. I needed to understand the ephemeral in a different way.
Plan of the ancient settlement of Bonito Pueblo showing houses and circular kivas, New Mexico (USA), *Primitive Architecture*, pg. 119

Section and plan of a kiva, Mesa Verde, Colorado (USA), *Primitive Architecture*, pg. 125.
the physicalness of the ephemeral

The question remains, How do you architecturalize stories or How do you make architecture out of the ephemeral or narrative?

KIVA S - VESSELS FOR SPIRITS

The investigation took a turn when I stumbled upon the book “Primitive architecture” by Enrico Guidoni. It was there where I first saw the kivas built in ancient pueblos in the United States. The kiva is a “…semi-underground sanctuary where the kachina spirits dwell…”¹ (see figure 1 & 2) These sanctuaries are containers or vessels for spirits. The designers of the kiva had a different understanding of the ephemeral. Instead of assigning qualities of lightness or ephemerality to the structure of the kiva, the materials of the kiva are heavy. The materials used for the kiva are earth. The kiva is underground built out of dirt and very real.

How can this structure in the ground connect one to the spiritual world? When in the kiva, there is a clear connection to the ground. One can touch the dirt and smell it. Amazingly, there is also a magical connection to the sky. When inside the kiva all one can see is the earth and directly above is the sky, nothing else. The presence of the physical (earth) and the spiritual (sky) are inseparable.

The spiritual is being housed by the most physical of elements, the earth.

This realization completely transformed my thinking of the ephemeral and how I could begin to think of an architecture of stories and storytelling. It is the permanence of the earth which connects us to the sky, the spiritual, or the ephemeral such as stories.

¹. Guidoni, Enrico. Primitive Architecture. p.118
Sketches of wall possibilities
I began to think that if the kivas could be storage for spirits, could there be something similar to contain or provide storage for stories? If stories were stored in a kiva-like place everyone could experience, see or read them. This leads me to the question:

*What architectural element could provide an architecture with the function of a container of expression? WALLS.*

Walls are a necessary architectural element and are about the permanence of the structure. As in a ruin, all that is left behind are it's walls. Through the walls one can get a good idea of what the structure was like. In the same way the walls can act as this container for stories, containers that are the permanent part of the building. If the building ever went to ruin all that would be left behind are it's walls of expression.

*The walls can be elements where the children can draw, write, and express their stories.* These permanent walls are places of expression. Walls expressing culture, faith etc. This architectural element can itself be a container, but it can also make spaces specific to stories and storytelling.
site history
sketch of "los cristeros"
In the 1800's the area that we know today as Venice was owned by two rancheros, Machado and Talamantes. The area was mostly used for grazing, since a major part of the land was marshland. The marshland had also been used as hunting grounds for mallard ducks by the Indians and the rancheros, began to be filled in 1904 to allow development.

The development of the Venice area began in 1892 by the rich businessman Abbot Kinney. Abbot Kinney had traveled extensively in Europe, and was impressed by the canals in Venice, Italy. When he acquired the property in Venice he was determined to make a replica of Venice Italy with canals, gondolas and imported as much as he could. His vision was not only to make a replica of Venice, Italy but to make the new Venice into an entertainment center.

In 1904 canal excavation began. There were 8 miles of shallow canals, with arched bridges and imported gondolas and gondoliers. Later development of the area caused more canals to be built. These new canals were connected to the Ballona Lagoon Outlet (see next page). The land by the canals was used for homes, amusement parks and for recreation. The amusement park and pier was the main attraction. The pier had a roller coaster, restaurants, a pool and many more family attractions. Thousands of people from all over the Los Angeles area flocked to the area to be entertained. The Santa Fe Rail Road was a Major source of Transportation. Once the visitor had arrived there was a trolley line that took guests from the canals to the pier and to the many destinations in the park.
Aerial View of canals and Ballona Creek water outlet
History of Venice of America, pg. 56 & 57

Site Map- Underlay
Evening Outlook, pg. 29
indicating the old and existing canals.
canals / population

Due to poor water circulation of the canals and the need of streets for cars caused part of the canals to be filled in. Approximately half of the canals were filled in 1927 and used as streets and parking (light grey in diagram, the canals filled in black are the remaining canals). The end of the canal marks the beginning of the site for the shelter, which has been vacant or used as parking since the early 1900's.

By the 1960's the surviving canals were filthy and not seen as an attraction. The canals had gone from 6 feet in depth to about 2 feet because of the filth in them. There was a concentration of low income housing in the area. Protest to clean up the area began in the mid 60's, and by 1977 they were cleaned up. This cleaning up caused property costs to rise and the low income housing reduced.

population

Due to the increasing property costs in the area the minority population began to drop. A census in 1990 showed how much the minority population had been decreasing. The results were:

- 60% white
- 23% latino
- 15% black
- 2% asian
- 15% of community is below poverty

The minority population moved from the areas surrounding the canals to the northern areas of Venice, crossing the railroad tracks. The majority of the latino population remains in that area, however the increasing rents keep pushing many away. Those who have left move to less expensive areas in the Los Angeles Area. In essence, the minority population has and is being driven out of Venice.

My father tells me stories of when Venice was racially integrated. He says,

"I remember going to the post office or bank and everyone around me was a different color, a few people like me and a few with different color skin. Now, everyone is white. It does feel different."
Site plan
commercial in dark grey
residential light gray

facing page
Site Map- Underlay
Evening Outlook, pg.29
indicating site, school, library, and park.
The site chosen for the shelter is attempting to claim part of the Venice area as property for immigrant children who find themselves homeless. I think it appropriate to claim a piece of city property for it's children.

The site by the waters edge reminded me of la llorona. According to the tale the llorona or wailing woman frequented places with bodies of water like rivers and canals looking for her lost children. The site in that sense felt appropriate for it's program.

The site straddles one of the canals. It's one square block on each side of the canal. It is at this canal where the water stops, the water does not flow above ground beyond that point. The circulation for the canals is through the Ballona Creek outlet, to the south-east (see p.54).

The upper left hand corner of the site is mostly commercial. For this reason I decided that the most public part of the building would face this direction. Whereas the rest of the site is surrounded by residential areas (see facing page).

There is a library about four blocks away, as well as an elementary school (see diagram). While the proximity of these two institutions might not seem important, they are crucial to the positioning of the project. It is very important for the children to have a school close-by, a place where they can meet the local children. This way the children will not be so alienated from the outside world. The library is also an ideal place for the institution's children to interact with the local kids as well as with adults.
Site plan showing where photographs were taken
site photos
Site photos
See pg.56 for location
top photo
#5 & 6. End of canal

bottom photos
#7. Existing canals with houses on the edges.
#8. Locks at the end of the canal system.
studies
A family from Pilsen had púntas on their home, and the wife was frightened by the mysterious things that went on there. A priest was called, but the priest could not help. The frightened family decided to move from the house. They packed their belongings and had gone only a short way down the road when the wife called to the daughters to go back for the broom, which they had left behind. The Duendes answered, "We are bringing it."
The wall was the architectural element used as the starting point for the following study models. The wall as discussed in the chapter "Architecture of the Ephemeral" pg.41 is the architectural element which will be used to explore storytelling. It is on these walls that the children will draw or write on, as a way of expressing who they are, where they came from, and where they are going.

It is this wall of interaction that is the crux of the project, and the starting point of these study models.
building / profane

landscape / imagination

study model #2
program

program sketch (opposite page)
model # 2- program and bridge

The second model focused on the program of the building or the institutional part of the project. The canal always seemed as a barrier that could not be crossed by the institution. It was here where I decided to split the program. On one side of the canal would be the institution and on the other a landscape. The Landscape's role would be explored in the next study models.

_The bridge_ The division of the program to both sides of the canal required a bridge. The bridge became very important to the way one left the institution, and how one enters the landscape on the other side of the canal.

_The bridge is about leaving the world of the profane to enter the world of the storyteller's landscape, a world of the imagination._ (see sketch on facing page)

Getting on the bridge is the first step to leave the physical world. As one crosses the different parts of the building, it's as if one is leaving the profane behind. The first part of the program is the Adult Wing, this is the place where the children leave the adult world. Then they cross by the School, leave that behind. The last threshold is the housing. The housing serves as a gate to Storytellers Landscape. Once the child crosses the gate, they enter the landscape of stories.
study model #3

storyteller's landscape at center enclosed by the cityscape
The storyteller's landscape is a place of the imagination. The walls that define the landscape are walls of stories. Children will actively draw or write their stories on the landscape's walls. The storyteller's landscape is unique and can only be reached by one of two bridges. One bridge is part of the building while the other smaller bridge begins in a institutional garden. But what is the landscape's shape and what are its boundaries?

Study model #3 - Storyteller's Landscape at the center

Study model #3 was attempting to define the storyteller's landscape on the other side of the canal, opposite to the institution. The exploration began with the storytelling walls. The walls on the institution side are experienced by crossing them perpendicularly. While on the side of the storyteller's landscape, the walls act as an envelope enclosing the landscape. In this study the limits of the garden are the walls or what I call the city. I refer to this area as the city because the surrounding city can build up to the wall. In this scheme the storyteller's landscape is at the center, while the walls are on the perimeter. The concern with this scheme was the children. Would the children feel trapped in the center? Would it be more like a fortress, were the children cannot see the outside world.
model #4

storyteller's landscape developing into a labyrinth at the perimeter
This study was a leap forward in the development of the storyteller's landscape. The concern that I had for the children was solved. Instead of the landscape being at the center, the landscape could be at the perimeter. If the Landscape was at the perimeter, the children could see to the outside neighborhood and not feel trapped. The Landscape became a layering of walls, almost as a labyrinth. The labyrinthine landscape is made of storytelling walls. The center of the landscape was still considered part of the Storytellers landscape. The bridges in this scheme were independent elements which served the only function of taking the children across the canal and separating them from the profane or the world of the everyday.
bridge becomes part of the building. The storyteller's Landscape as a labyrinth on the perimeter and playground at the center & storyteller's house.
study model #5 - Playground, Storyteller's House & Landscape

storyteller's landscape / Labyrinth

Study model #5 was a tool for refining ideas. It was clear by now that the best place for the storyteller's landscape was at the periphery. The smaller bridge would take the children directly to storytellers landscape at the periphery. The larger bridge, originating inside the building would take the children from the shelter and other children from the neighborhood to the center.

playground at center

In the Center of the storytellers landscape is a playground. This playground is for all children. It is the place where the children from the shelter meet and interact with the neighborhood children. It is from the playground that neighborhood children may have access to the storytellers landscape or labyrinth.

The playground is surrounded by layers of walls or layers of stories.

storytellers house

The storytellers house is at the perimeter in the storytellers landscape. This is the place where the adult storytellers interact with the children. The adult storytellers live in this house for a few months at a time. The adult can be a person from the community or a staff member. The resident storyteller plays a key role in introducing or re-introducing the children to storytelling.
opposite page
diagram showing final threshold (white box)

this page
top
detail of wall for shoes. The last threshold before entering the storyteller's landscape. The shoe wall.
bottom
Three dimensional sketch of thresholds
Threshold

The processional path from the institution to the storytellers landscape is important. As explained earlier, the separation of the children from the profane in order to enter the landscape is important.

The threshold is the last marker or place that the children go through in order to enter the landscape. It is the last place where the children can remove all contact with the physical or profane world. This last threshold is on the zenith of the bridge. It is a place were the children remove their shoes, the last trace of the city, and enter into the landscape.

The path to the threshold begins outside the institution. The children enter the institution from the city. They bring baggage like most of us.

The first threshold they cross in the institution is the adult wing. The adult wing is where the children have the most contact with adults. It is there where children get therapy, or get visitors. There is also a small library at the entrance, for interaction with the community children.

The second threshold is the school. Here is where the children learn and have interaction with other children. This is also the place were children open their imagination to ideas. Gradually, the children begin to open their imagination and experience new ways of seeing things.

The third threshold is the housing wing. The wing serves as a gate to the landscape. This is the place where the children sleep and dream. Here they truly enter into their imaginations through dreaming.

The final threshold is the place were the children remove their shoes, the last physical link to the profane world. The contact to the profane world is no longer there.
components from studies used in final proposal

figure 1
Storyteller's Landscape at the perimeter, as a labyrinth.

figure 2
Playground at center, place were children from the institute interact with the children from the community.

figure 3
Bridge as link to Storyteller's landscape.
Program as thresholds to cross before entering the world of the imagination.
The final threshold (shown as white box). The place to remove shoes or the last connection to the outside world, before entering the storyteller's landscape.
The storyteller's house at the perimeter.
housing studies
Los Muertos

Don't do bad to people because if you do, after they die, they will come back and pull your feet while you sleep. It will happen because it has happened to people.
Housing study model #1 (3/5 view)
Vertical access-two ways of accessing the units from the horizontal access platform

Housing study #1 (side view) facing page

Housing Section (sketch)
Sketch showing access from bridge to housing platform. Access to the units is through the horizontal access platform.
The housing units serve as the gate to the Storyteller’s landscape. This is where the children sleep and slip away into the dream world. The units are on columns above the ground as a tree house (see facing page). A place to separate themselves from the institution and the earth.

Access to the housing units is through the access platform. From this platform the children can access the individual units. The access platform is reached through the bridge. The housing units have two main vertical access areas shown in the model (facing page). The vertical access space is not only the way to get to the units, but an active space. A place where children can talk to their neighbor, get sun and enjoy the sky.
Housing Study Model #2
Vertical access defined by Concrete walls.

Housing Study Sketch
Vertical access defined by concrete walls. Columns as structural system for the rest of the building.

this page
housing -plans and section sketches
Vertical access is defined by concrete walls which reach out to the sky. These are the only walls that touch the ground. As seen in the diagram above, the columns give a tree like experience of the structure. While the walls mark the place of vertical movement or access.

The units are clustered into four clusters. Each cluster has four bedrooms (see facing page- sketch plans). Two to three children live in each bedroom, for a total of eight children per cluster. For a maximum occupancy of forty eight children.

It was important to not design a place like a dormitory, a place with rooms lined up to a corridor, with no sense of family or groups. This is why I decided to group the children, three or two per bedroom and eight to twelve in a cluster. In this way the children can form groups as a family, or make close friends. There is more possibility of intimacy between the children in this situation.
facing page
Storyteller's landscape sketches

dthis page
section through bridge and housing
sketches
proposal
La Virgen de Talpa

The Virgin of Talpa protested against being moved to another town by miraculously reappearing in her niche at the altar in Talpa each time she was removed. The church bells would ring to announce her arrival, or her footprints could be seen in the dust of the road. The Virgin was never moved from Talpa.
figure #1 (top)
program & bridge

figure #2 (middle)
playground at center

figure #3 (bottom)
storyteller's landscape at the perimeter
The Final proposal has the following major components. The wall which raps around entire project to form a labyrinth. The bridge is the link between the institution or world of the profane and the world of the imagination or the storytellers landscape. When the bridge is on the institution's side it becomes part of the building. The program is arranged so as to gradually remove yourself from the profane. First the child will pass by the adult wing, remove him or herself from the adults. Walk by the school, learn and then proceed to the gate. The gate is the children's housing units. The final threshold is marked by the white box. This is where, as discussed earlier is where the children take off their shoes and enter the landscape. The removal of the shoes is the last connection to the world of the profane.

The second component is the playground at the center of the Landscape. The bridge taking the children from the world of the profane takes the children into the playground. It is in this playground the children from the institution will interact with the community children. The playground is a place of exploring, it is what the children make it. If they want swings, then there are swings. If they want it to be a place to build ships, tree houses, or just hang out in the small pool then that is what it is. It's mailable, just like children.

The third component is the Storytellers Landscape. The Landscape is at the perimeter of the playground. This landscape is for the use of the institute's children. This landscape is a landscape of expression through writing and/or drawing on the walls which enclose it.
site model
showing site and canals
floor plans

Institution Storytellers Landscape

First floor

Plan

Reading rooms off of the bridge

library / entry

adult wing

school

playground

storyteller's house

Institution

Storytellers Landscape
Site model showing adult wing, school, reading rooms and two-bridges.
model
Section A - through bridge
detail / bridge
Detail from section A storyteller's landscape. Walls with written stories.
(see facing page for are)
detail / storyteller’s landscape
Corner view of landscape
model / storyteller’s landscape
view of storyteller's landscape at the perimeter and the playground at the center.
section B - through storyteller's house
detail / storytellers’s house
Partial site model (facing page) showing housing and storyteller's House

Storyteller's house and landscape detail (this page)
storyteller’s house model
Bridge & housing view from above
landscape
section C - through housing
View of housing from storyteller's landscape
Housing - side elevation

Housing view (from school) facing page
section D - through bridge and school
Church & monastery in Tlaltelolco, Mexico City. First monastery to teach Spanish to the indígenas.
conclusion

The exploration of narrative through architecture may seem inconsequential to some. Yet cultures like my own (Mexican), communicate through narrative verbal or written, and through what they build. One is not so separate from the other. Churches or pyramids for example are physical stories of a spiritual culture. We make stories with what we build, good or bad. Stories are around us everyday, build or spoken. When a culture is aware of it's stories it is more careful of what it builds, because it's about who they are and what these things represent.

The value of storytelling in my culture as well as others is priceless. However as times change the importance that storytelling had in the past is diminishing. As this powerful method of transferring ideas and culture diminishes we all lose. Lose in that we know less and less about ourselves, our past and our future. Therefore it is important to try to find new ways of stirring up interest toward this art form. Architecture is a possible way of exploring storytelling in a new way. In order to bring storytelling back to everyday life. This new way of exploring storytelling through architecture is what I tried to do in this thesis.

The thesis exploration is by no means the only answer to exploring new ways of re-introducing storytelling, but it's one way. It's one exploration, it's the beginning of my investigation. The final drawings and models are not the end result but the beginning of a personal architectural journey. A journey which is very personal yet universal.
All images unless otherwise noted are by author
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History of the Venice area


identity


precedents


kindergarten architecture


