

MODULE 3

WHITE PAPER: ENVIRONMENT AND PLACE

I. NORMATIVE SYNTHESIS

THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS

If τέχνη is to remain under the rule of ποίησις, and if poietic making becomes practically intelligible through the recognition and resolution of patterns, then the next question concerns the actual instantiation of those patterns: namely, in the surroundings and technological extensions within which human life actually unfolds. Any such deliberate and purposive human instantiation of such patterns—which is always through some exercise of τέχνη—does not merely posit a discrete instrument or set of tools or system into an otherwise neutral background. Rather, such an intervention always both presupposes and subsequently alters the various relations by which our surroundings become places for human action, perception, memory, expectation, and belonging—that is, by which those places are rendered *environments of human living*. As a consequence, the criteria by which we evaluate the technological instruments cannot be limited to considering the those instruments themselves, but must include consideration also of the environments: both how those environments are effected and how the instruments or systems can integrate into them, and what the effects are of such integration. Even a minor technological intervention may recalibrate the entirety of the environment, making it more or less living.

The first theoretical distinction necessary for clarifying this claim is between **place** and **space**. The modern tendency (i.e., after Descartes and Newton) regards the conceptual object of space as primordial: an abstract, homogeneous, measurable extension within which particular places are potentially located.¹ At the level of actual experience, we should reject this priority of space. That is, we never encounter abstract space as such, but we *do* encounter rooms, paths, homes, streets, landscapes, tables, windows, screens, voices, and persons—that is, determinate places structured by relations and possibilities of action and the agents occupying or inhabiting them. Space may be subsequently conceived as an abstraction separated from these objects of actual sensory experience, and found to be apply univocally to them all; but the ease of understanding this abstracted notion should not be confused with any ontological priority of space itself. Re-ordering our conceptions this way does not constitute an outright rejection of mathematical abstraction, which has proven so technologically powerful. But recognizing an experiential priority to place helps us to identify a certain disorder in the soul that occurs when the abstraction is given priority.

¹ In a way, this is realized perhaps most perfectly in the Kantian “Copernican revolution”, where nature and its intelligibilities are no longer ascribed to the mind-independent real world but to the laws discerned solely through intellectual conceptualization, and, specifically as pertains to the extended world, in the “pure intuition of space” (which is not really an intuition at all).

This disorder is central to the technological crisis, diagnosed by Dr. Pugen through his reading of Edmund Husserl (*Crisis of the European Sciences*) and Sigfried Giedion (*Space, Time, and Architecture*). Put summarily: the mathematization of nature associated with the modern scientific revolution permits an extraordinary technical command of spatial relations, but it also encourages the treatment of the world as if its intelligibility were exhausted by the formal coordinates of abstract space and subsequent imposition of measurable quantities on all corporeal phenomena. Organization of the built environment according to such abstraction transforms the arts of construction and design into the production of optimized schemata for efficient fabrication and idealized but limited presentation: imposition of a conceptual scheme upon surroundings without adequate attention to the patterns of life already present or naturally possible there.² Such spatially-conceived fabrication, which deliberately bypasses efforts to discern and resolve with the patterns that characterize suitable, resolute dwelling, contradicts genuine poietic making, which discovers and brings forth a fitting place or a coherence of places.

The concept of *Umwelt* (originally proposed by the theoretical biologist Jakob von Uexküll and further developed by semioticians, including John Deely) further clarifies why surroundings cannot ever be neutral for us: the same physical surroundings do not constitute an identically-experienced world for every living being. Rather, the *Umwelt* (“around-world”, by its literal etymology) is constituted through relations between an organism and what appears to it as interpretively significant within those surroundings. In the case of the human being, this relational patterning of the world is not only perceived through sensation but linguistically and intellectually articulated: persons do not only respond to sense-perceptual stimuli but recognize intelligible meanings, teleological purposes, histories, duties, possibilities, and symbolic valence, among other such insensible objectivities, as realities that not only permeate but exceed the sensible elements as something irreducible to them. Consequently, a human place can *never* be reduced to the quantitative measurements or geometric configurations of spatial extension, nor even to the mere material qualities by which it is characterized. A fireplace can be not only a source of heat, but a home’s center: a site of family gathering, a locus for memories, a place of calm and comfort, of meaningful relations. A television occupying the same wall may imitate some of those visual functions and constitute an occasion for gathering but does so in a way which radically changes the pattern of events. Small changes to the physical location through technological mediation can have profound consequences.

Technological mediation therefore effects the environment by not only altering what is literally present or what takes prominence in our attention, but also by which actions tend to become easy or difficult (reducing or increasing friction, as sitting down and turning on the television or picking up a book), which relations move to the center and which to the margin (e.g., conversation or observation), and which objects become focal in experience (one another, a text, or the screen). This is why a recovery of the twentieth-century “new space conception”, identified by Giedion, is potentially fruitful—but alone, insufficient. That is, through reflection upon electronic media, theories of relativity, and the related environmental transformations we can recognize that space is not best understood as a dead container populated by self-enclosed objects but rather that the objects and events populating a place participate in forming the experienced field of spatial extension itself; space may

² Consider, for instance, the Sears catalogue of the mid-20th century, in which one could order a house that appeared attractive on the page but which may have been entirely unsuited to one’s local environment.

be ripe with possibilities, in other words, but those must be understood as *possibilities-for...* Yet the recovery of this dynamic spatial constitution does not automatically restore our habits of dwelling: the same conceptual revolution (i.e., against “dead container space”) can be used to justify arbitrary or novel experimentations with such spatial configuration; the “for” may be an *inhuman* “for”. We need as the principal criterion, instead, the fittingness of the relations as instantiated for the beings who inhabit them, which requires a grasp of those beings’ natures.

Christopher Alexander aids us in articulating that criterion. A living place arises where the geometry of surroundings and the pattern of events mutually reinforce one another in a manner that resolves rather than multiplies conflict. His example of the “window place” remains instructive for making such evaluations. Light draws a person toward the window; bodily comfort draws the person toward a place to sit. If the window is merely a hole in the wall while all the seating is arranged around something else, the room simultaneously pulls the person in at least two directions. If the window itself becomes a place for sitting—not necessarily the only place, but having at least one such place—the desire to sit by the window and observe the outside world in its natural illumination and the desire to be comfortable become mutually supportive. The aesthetic judgment that such a room feels better to occupy thereby transcends mere private preference: it recognizes a more comprehensive resolution of the relations actually structuring the environment and the self, as the kind of being that the human is.

This insight gives us an understanding of place specifically helpful for the purposes of technological resolution—that is, an understanding of place as something acted upon through τέχνη. As within τέχνη-mediated-experience, place appears as relatively stable configuration of material, perceptual, intellectual, cathectic, social, and temporal relations within which recurrent patterns of events become possible—as the mind-independent correlate to environment, in other words. These may be vitalizing or deadening places inasmuch as the patterns they encourage contribute to or detract from the flourishing of life. A living place enables those patterns to unfold in a manner proportionate to the genuine powers and goods of the persons who inhabit it. Place is therefore both something received and, in part, something made. It depends upon realities not of human making—such as the seasons, relevant distances, topography, materials, and natural human needs such as sociality, nourishment, privacy, and so on—but it is also continually interpreted and reconfigured through human making. Arts of construction and design are tasked with balancing between receptive cognition of the whole and effecting those reconfigurations in a way truly resolute.

The digital environment makes this relation between innate limits and artistic freedom especially difficult. Physical places tend to resist arbitrary reconfiguration: walls, weather, weight specifications, tensile strength, melting points, distance, gravity, and material scarcities all impose certain unavoidable (if nevertheless technically manipulable) limitations on what the arts of construction and design can accomplish—constraints that bind before one can even evaluate a pattern’s fittingness for human flourishing.³ Digital environments, on the other hand, are comparatively flat and malleable. A single screen can become a meeting room, library, marketplace, cinema, game, newspaper, correspondence desk, and social forum within seconds—even simultaneously. This

³ Efforts to reconfigure all aspects of the physical according to the schema of fabrication have, in fact, resulted in the declining quality of many products.

extraordinary flexibility allows for certain opportunities, but it also deprives the user of many natural distinctions and stopping points. Twenty open browser tabs, a crowded taskbar, autofill, perpetual streams of video, infinite scrolling, or the possibility of moving instantly from work to entertainment often result in the disappearance of boundaries between what should be distinct patterns of activity into one undifferentiated blur.

The consequence is that digital dwelling requires more deliberate patterning, not less. Because it is *not* a place in the proper sense of the term—though it certainly constitutes a kind of environment—we may easily lose our bearings when we inhabit the digital. Many of us, for instance, suffer a “consciousness disappearance” (or “time disappearance”) in our screen use: actions become so easy and familiar that the person no longer notices the transition into them, or “out” of the physical world they inhabit. This does not mean that every technological or screen-mediated action requires that we make continual careful reflective deliberations: good habits properly remove the need to re-solve ordinary practical problems about what we are doing each time those situations arise. Cultivating habits that support rational action and automaticity where evaluation is *not* needed, therefore, is crucial. A hammer should become easy to hold and a door to open—but a smartphone should not become so frictionless that it can be opened dozens of times without any remembered purpose. Good technological design should therefore make proper patterns easy without making purposeless engagement invisible.

The same principle applies to technologically mediated social presence. An online meeting can bring persons together in a common intellectual or conversational (or even recreational) activity, but it does not therefore reproduce the place of an in-person relationship without some loss. Physical co-presence carries visual, postural, spatial, tactile, and temporal cues that digital communication either attenuates or reorganizes. In a video conference via Teams or Zoom, for example, auditory structure becomes comparatively more important; turn-taking is altered; participants may occupy radically different local times and surroundings; and visual cues are reduced to framed images rather than embodied orientation around one table. This visual framing proves psychologically tiring in a way that physical presence does not—for it requires a tighter area of visual focus but with each person appearing in a different “place”, and responding to different stimuli. Situating the use of such a medium amidst ideals of poietic cognition does not fancy those differences away. It rather demands that we consciously find means of compensating for them and seeks to design the patterns of interaction in a way that better fits the medium while still fulfilling the properly human purpose.

Finally, the distinction between presence and simulation must remain explicit. Digital media can make otherwise absent realities cognitively present, and this capability is often genuinely beneficial: the ability to communicate with professors, for instance, or other persons interested in the same difficult questions, across great distance and despite differing schedules. But mediated representation can also become a simulacrum: a substitute preferred to the reality represented. The television displaying a digital fire above an unused hearth—a televised “yule log” instead of an actual burning fire—offers a deliberately comic image of the danger. More seriously, parasocial relationships, endlessly available entertainment, and digital representations of social life can reorganize a person’s environment around presences that are not actually there. It is not that fictitious or digitally-modulated representation is inherently false or bad but, to serve the good, representations must always remain ordered to the realities, relations, and actions that give them their proper and intrinsic meaning, rather than becoming vehicles of projection for possibilities outside the real. That is, technological mediation—especially through

digital environments—quickly becomes disproportionate when the sign or simulation becomes easier to inhabit than the real relation and gradually displaces its role in the experience of human life.

Resolution of technological interventions into our environments, therefore, requires a proper subordination to the living patterns unveiled by poesis. Modern spatial conceptions tend to reduce all extended quantities to a standing reserve of resources, with the presupposition that they can be reshaped or reordered however desired. By contrast, the resolution of technical capacity to living patterns of environment seeks to inherit properly what already is and to reconfigure places only in ways further fitting to human flourishing. In physical and digital environments alike, the task is to discover the concrete relations already operative, distinguish the constituent patterns from the merely transitory utilities, and creatively arrange and re-arrange technological mediations so that those relations do not contribute to fragmentation but resolve toward a more perfect wholeness.

PRACTICAL ACTIONS INDICATED

1. View environments as wholes rather than collections of parts

If we are evaluating a room, workplace, institutional environment, or digital system, we ought to begin by identifying the patterns of events that occur within or alongside them. This means inquiring into how the environment directs the attention of persons within it, towards which actions they are drawn, which transitions (in and out of the environment, as well as within it) are easy or difficult, what elements tend to become objects of focus, where and how certain conflicts arise, and which possibilities remain unused or ignored.

A television, smartphone, sidewalk, window, monitor, browser, or meeting platform, that is, cannot be accurately judged in isolation from the environment in which it is used or for which it is intended. How these technologies participate in different configurations of relations reveal their effects in a way isolated analyses cannot. Intended usages should therefore be compared against observed usages: e.g., are there sidewalks never traversed? Courtyards with seats that are never used? Frequently accessed shelves that are nevertheless difficult to reach? Corners where conversations are commonly had? Buttons that are never pressed and therefore features which are ignored? Makeshift solutions for common purposes? Such questions concerning action and environment help us to see where adjustments must be made.

2. Arrange shared physical environments around human activities and relations rather than screens

The organization of furniture and orientation of focal objects materially predispose recurring actions. Rooms should therefore be arranged according to the goods they are meant to support: conversation, shared meals, reading, rest, hospitality, play, contemplation, or some deliberate form of properly human engagement. The practical indication is not that every chair must turn away from a television, but that the television should not become the unexamined spatial center simply because it is the easiest object of common attention. Windows, natural light, seating, thresholds, outdoor views, and privacy can be deliberately coordinated so that the pattern of the room supports what is actually fruitful for human habitation. Ubiquitous dominance of screens causes a disproportionate relation of the person to the physical environment that cannot support actual human flourishing—turning one away from conversation or from presenting shared objects of attention into actual commonality. Screens, in other words, tend to segregate communal spaces into a plurality of purely individual modes of dwelling.

3. Give digital activities appropriate differentiations

The flatness of digital environments should be countered by structural distinctions that allow easier identifications. Different activities such as working, reading, communicating, being entertained, and browsing-for... should not automatically occupy the same uninterrupted interface. Reduce unused taskbar icons, close documents and tabs that no longer belong to the present activity, separate reading from notification-rich work where possible, and create visible beginnings and endings for recurrent digital tasks. The goal is not an idealized minimalism, but to restore boundaries between patterns of action that the screen otherwise collapses into a blurred homogeneity, so as to provide a properly intelligible structuring of the digital together with the physical.

One must also recognize a difficulty here of design, against which the user may need to exercise further deliberate organization. Many applications and systems are today intended to be “catch-all” solutions. This often results in a proliferation of the unnecessary: presenting a plenitude of possibilities that are irrelevant to one’s actual needs or purposes but which fragment our attention and environments nonetheless. Attempting to structure our own patterns of inhabiting these digital environments may compensate for some of this, but it is also incumbent upon designers to produce more thoughtfully-differentiated applications and systems.

4. Introduce friction where ease produces purposeless automaticity

Recognize that convenience is not always a total benefit. If a device or interface is repeatedly entered without a definite purpose, small increases of friction can restore conscious choice: disabling unnecessary autofill, reducing notifications, moving distracting applications out of immediate reach, requiring a more deliberate unlocking action, physically placing a device away from the body during periods of concentrated activity, or incorporating visual signifiers of one’s usage frequency and time can help alleviate our digital distractedness. This is not merely to promote a kind of “digital asceticism”, but to build habits of better functioning and moral virtue. In other words, friction benefits us most when it helps re-establish reflective cognizance of what we are doing and why we are doing it.

5. Compensate explicitly for what mediated environments remove

Where digital mediation is necessary or genuinely beneficial, we must recognize what is lost by that environment and deliberately structure compensations. Online conversations, for instance, may require more explicit moderation and turn-taking because the presence of bodily cues is diminished. High quality cameras help provide visual indications which can improve the conversational flow, while auditory clarity nevertheless deserves priority because the medium depends much more heavily upon the voice. (As an aside, this suggests also an increased importance today to trained skills in oratory.) Time-zone differences, local conditions, and the absence of shared physical surroundings should be recognized, as each may have consequences for our capacities of attention and a resulting cognitive fatigue. Well-structured digital mediation, in other words, does not consist purely in imitating physical presence but requires adoption of an intelligent pattern adapted to the actual conditions of the medium’s use.

6. Preserve the priority of real over simulated presence

Our ability today to create digital simulations is unparalleled in human history. But before we incorporate or substitute simulations of proper human activities and natural environments, we ought to distinguish what the

simulation lacks relative to the reality and both whether and how that substitution affects the patterns of our behavior. Digital fireplaces, works of art, livestreams, parasocial relationships, message exchanges with AI chatbots, virtual hikes displayed on treadmill screens, and so on, may appear rather similar to the reality but nevertheless eliminate certain obligations, risks, or reciprocities that gave the experience its full human significance. Simulations can serve genuine purposes and provide genuine goods for human flourishing, but they should remain always ancillary to rather than replacements for the realities, which realities give those experiences their actual meaning.

7. Practice brief daily reflection on technological patterns of environment

At the end of a day, it helps us to reconstruct the major modes and patterns of our technological engagements: how often we opened our phones, which websites or applications repeatedly drew attention (news? Social media? Sports? YouTube?), how many times we used these devices without any clear purpose or goal, what media agitated us and why, and which uses actually contributed to work, understanding, conversation, recreation or rest—and most especially, whether their non-work use contributed to genuine leisure or instead to distraction. Did we turn on the television without a specific intent to watch a particular program or event? Did we scroll aimlessly? Send text messages or post on forums while ignoring persons in the same room? Such reflection helps us to resolve our environments that ordinarily remain as backgrounds into purposively-ordered ways of life. We might identify, for instance, that we did have a good and fruitful video chat at a particular time of day; that we find an evening hour spent deliberately watching a documentary provided sufficient stimulation without being too taxing; or that playing an online game with a distant family member helps you stay in touch. We do not want, that is, merely to identify the bad patterns that undermine our lives but to discover and reinforce the good patterns already present.

II. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

CENTRAL QUESTION

How can technological mediation of our surroundings be ordered so that human beings inhabit properly proportioned, living places—rather than abstract or simulated spaces—and so that our physical and digital environments support patterns of dwelling proportionate to human nature?

PRINCIPAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Readings:

- Alexander 1979: *The Timeless Way of Building*, c.5, “Patterns of Space”; c.6, “Patterns Which Are Alive”; c.7, “Multiplicity of Living Patterns”.
- Giedion 1941: *Space, Time, and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, “Part I: History a Part of Life” and “Part X: Conclusion”.

Background:

- Deely 2002: “Umwelt” in *What Distinguishes Human Understanding?*

- Eliot 1922: *The Waste Land*.
- McLuhan and McLuhan 1988: *Laws of Media: The New Science*, especially the discussion of acoustic/electric space and environments.
- Husserl 1936: *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, for the critique of the mathematization of nature.

ORIENTATION

The first module established *ποίησις* as the rule of *τέχνη*: human making, including in those elements we call “technology”, is rightly ordered only when it brings forth meaningful possibilities proportionate to dwelling. The second module supplied the mediating concept of pattern, arguing that wisdom concerning the use and development of technologies requires more than pattern-recognition, i.e., the detection of regularities in use; it requires pattern-resolution, the deliberate ordering of relations toward living wholes. The present module inquires into the discovery and realization of such patterns. This inquiry unfolds through the concepts of environment and place: every technological artifact exists within a field of relations, and those relations constitute the surroundings in which human beings live. To understand the full effects, both negative and positive, of technological artifacts on human living, we must also understand their effects on those surroundings.

This inquiry therefore begins by considering the contrast between place and space. The scientific abstraction of measurable space is legitimate within its proper domain, but the modern habit of treating that abstraction as primary for artifactual praxis can obscure the actual order of experience and result in technological interventions that undermine human life. Human beings, that is, do not first inhabit coordinates which are subsequently filled with “content”. We live, rather, in determinate places and only subsequently abstract spatial dimensions from them. The technological danger arises when a design begins from an idealized spatial scheme and requires living persons to conform themselves to it. Contrariwise, technological opportunity arises when abstraction becomes seen as an instrument for betterment of places: used, that is, as a tool for discovering and realizing relations that allow places to support human life.

Giedion, Husserl, Eliot, McLuhan, and Alexander are helpful participants in this conversation because each, in rather different registers, responds to the fragmentation produced by the modern spatial paradigm. Through their work, we can see twentieth-century developments not only as identifying a crisis but also as providing us an opening. The breakdown of the old conception of space as homogeneous container (as in Cartesian and Newtonian thought), consequent to relativistic theories of spacetime and to the extensions wrought by electronic technologies, makes visible a more relational conception in which a multitude of constituent forces—not only extended objects but also fields of force, events, and agents—participate in determining or altering the possibilities for experiencing an environment. Yet this re-conception does not only allow positive opportunity. Modernist and postmodernist experiments have often taken the relativistic conception of spacetime and falsely superimposed this upon human experience—attempting thereby to impose abstractions of possibility even farther removed from living patterns into the built environment. That our technological opportunities not be pursued in a manner contrary to the proper poietic vision requires understanding the proportion of pattern to the central pillar of human dwelling.

Alexander's pattern language provides us a means here for moving from general claims about the intelligible meaning of "environment" to concrete evaluation and determination concerning places. Patterns of events that occur in some meaningful relation to one another give us the actual constitution of a particular's intelligible possibilities, and such a pattern is living when it resolves the real forces present rather than setting them into chronic opposition. We can extend this method beyond architecture to the contemporary digital environment, where the absence of material limits makes the deliberate observation and constitution of patterns both more difficult and more urgent. It is important to note that digital technologies are in one sense eminently influential upon place, inasmuch as they reconfigure the physical environment in which they exist, and in another sense have influences irreducible to place, inasmuch as they allow those environments to be reconfigured by relations which transcend the ordinary experience of place.

The focus of our inquiry consequently shifts from whether technology changes the physical constitution of an environment to how a given technological mediation configures the psychological engagement of human beings within such an affected place. The same device may participate in living or unliving patterns depending not only upon its own intrinsic configuration but the manner of its incorporation, i.e., the particular relations by which it is surrounded, and by the modality of those relations. A screen reserved for deliberate shared conversations, deliberately excluding other objects, does not have the same environmental effects as a screen continually available as an undifferentiated and indiscriminate portal to endless diverse phenomena, even if the hardware is identical. We must therefore recognize environments and places as constituted by dynamic patterns of relations and see the exercise of our technological judgments as inseparable from the habitual praxis of ordering those relations toward genuine human dwelling.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Place is experientially prior to abstract space.

Human life begins from particular instantiated surroundings encountered through perception and action. Abstract space can be employed as a legitimate modality for conceiving those surroundings, but it must be understood as derivative from place rather than encountered independently of it, let alone prior to it. Treating abstraction as the primary reality risks leading to the design of environments adapted to conceptual schemata rather than for living persons.

2. Human environments are relational worlds, not mere aggregations of proximate objects.

The concept of *Umwelt* shows that surroundings become an environment according to the relations a living being forms within them, relations dependent upon its powers of observation, evaluation, and adaptation. Human beings specifically add linguistic and therefore intellectual, cultural, historical, and ethical dimensions to this web of relations. Consequently, technologies alter environments not merely when they intervene upon material configurations but whenever and however they change the significance of relations through which persons inhabit those physical surroundings.

3. The mathematization of space is technologically useful but becomes destructive when mistaken for an ontological priority.

The modern abstract spatial paradigm enables greater precision in measurement, prediction, fabrication, and control over materials. The crisis identified through Husserl's work is not of mathematics as such—indeed, Husserl was himself a mathematician first—but rather the forgetting that mathematical space is an idealization (a point noted by Newton himself!). Whenever idealizations become the presupposed standards against which lived realities are measured, the resulting environment tends itself toward abstraction, uniformity, and the imposition of schemata disproportioned to the patterns of actual human dwelling.

4. The twentieth-century recovery of relational space is an opportunity but not an automatic solution.

Electronic media and new scientific conceptions disclose a world less adequately described as isolated objects inside a neutral container; in other words, relativity and electricity challenge the fundamental presuppositions of uniform temporal and spatial abstraction. This recovery (so-called for, albeit under different conditions, the effects of actual relations between extant things held a much greater importance in antiquity) can help reunite space with psychological subjectivity and existential significance by restoring the primacy of *place*. Yet much work is necessary for this recovery to contribute to living patterns. The new conception must be purposefully subordinated to carefully discerned patterns of human life—rather than used for justifying arbitrary experimentation with form and disregard for the human center of experience.

5. Living places arise from convergence between locational patterns and patterns of events.

Alexander's analysis shows us that a place succeeds when its physical arrangement conduces to the actions, attractions, needs, and relations that properly belong to human beings living or working there. The “window place” makes this visible by resolving the competing pull toward light and toward comfortable sitting into one coherent configuration. We can evaluate the quality of an environment by means of a relational resolution, that is, and not merely by visual preference alone. We ought to ask what tensions detract from our other environments—workplaces, living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, churches, etc.—and how we can resolve them.

6. Digital environments collapse distinctions among activities and thus the sense of place.

Physical environments normally differentiate our activities through constraints of distance, specific sensory differences of their objects (affecting not only sight and hearing but also smell, taste, and touch), having distinct thresholds, supporting or requiring certain bodily postures, and imposing various other limits of the corporeal. A digital device, contrariwise, can place us psychologically amidst radically different activities on the same screen with nearly frictionless transitions. This plasticity creates extraordinary possibilities, particularly regarding communication and its speed, but also descends regularly into a kind of environmental flatness where objects become cluttered, we easily lapse into distraction, and we lose conscious awareness of the transitions that carry us between distinct patterns of action.

KEY EXPLANATORY CLAIMS

1. **Place is a structured field of relations in which recurrent human actions become possible.**

The physical dimensions of a location are important, but they truly become a place for human

habitation only through their relation to embodied, perceptual, intellectual, and social activity; they are deficient places insofar as they intrude upon the flourishing of these activities.

2. **Space is a valid abstraction whose use becomes disordered when treated as prior to concrete places.**

The problem is not attaining a more precise mathematical knowledge of extension but the imposition of an idealized spatial scheme as though it exhausted the essential reality of lived environments.

3. **Technologies mediate surroundings by reorganizing both action and attention.**

An artifact affects the constitution of an environment whenever its presence or integration makes some relations easier, others harder, some objects focal, and some patterns recurrent—even when the material structure of the place otherwise remains unchanged.

4. **A living environmental pattern resolves real forces into a coherent relation.**

Alexander's window-place illustrates the principle: good design does not satisfy only one particular physical function or need but allows multiple legitimate tendencies—prolonged observation of the outside world, physical comfort—to coexist within a more comprehensive whole.

5. **Digital environments require explicit and conscious differentiation because their native plasticity erases many of the boundaries supplied by physical place.**

When work, entertainment, communication, news, shopping, and social interaction all share one device and one visual field, the user and designer must deliberately and cooperatively strive to reconstruct the kind of proportionate distinctions that material surroundings would otherwise make evident.

6. **Simulation becomes destructive when it ceases to signify and thus replaces the desire for reality.**

The problem is not representation as such but the inversion by which the easier image, persona, feed, or spectacle becomes the preferred object. In consequence, we cease to dwell in reality and begin to dwell in fantasies that may become decreasingly representative of the real potentialities befitting our nature as human.

7. **Technological mediation becomes poietic when it helps transform surroundings into places where living patterns can be inhabited.**

The principal evaluative standard for the constitution of our environments should be neither novelty nor efficiency, but whether the environment, as a product of τέχνη, conduces to genuine flourishing of the human powers and interpersonal or psychological relations, in accordance with the vision of ποίησις.