

I Live in a Beautiful House, on a Beautiful Street in Beautiful Montreal: Notes on Well-being and the Experience of Place Aesthetics

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Are early, multisensory experiences of places significant for a person's ideals and self-image?

I have traveled to and lived in many countries, where I have enjoyed many nights and days in unfamiliar rooms and streets, enthusiastically "taken in" by a wide array of landscapes, and admired old and new neighborhoods. I have loved and acted upon many places away from home, transformed and maintained them with great determination and pains. Yet, the word "beauty" still evokes for me essentially the many facets of a Mediterranean landscape, garden and house, as well as what I spontaneously recognize as the characteristics of Mediterranean human beauty.

I have had this knowledge about this deeper me as long as I can recall, while many other facets of my own self have long been hidden to me, or remain obscure and hardly sketched in my conscience. I thus conduct my life with a clear awareness of the meaning to me of the word "beautiful", while, on the other hand, I continue my struggle to better know many aspects of my own self.

Yet, my walk along the meandering path to self-understanding and my sense of beauty are one. For what I call "Mediterranean beauty" is the anchor of my search, its foundation, and the limpid conviction from which I spring to more discoveries, sometimes in grace and many times in distress. It is the stable element in the flow of my life, the reference that gives measure to my pace.

I do not, however, experience this reference as a secure fixture. As stable as it may seem at first glance, my silent walk towards my own self often brings me to unstable grounds where "Mediterranean beauty" is much less a solid certitude than a multifaceted experience, a home base from which I appraise the places I inhabit or visit, where I confront obstacles, and to which I return.

Light

Mediterranean beauty is light, fresh, unsullied summer light at dawn, the serene and brief moment of silence and pause between sleep and being awake on the roof of my childhood house.

It is the active early morning light, during the only hours when work seems legitimate. It is the still noon light and the pounding afternoon light you love but retreat and protect yourself from, the light of the secluded hours behind closed windows. This light means pause, a retreat into oneself, and loving distance from the world, secure in the knowledge that it is indeed

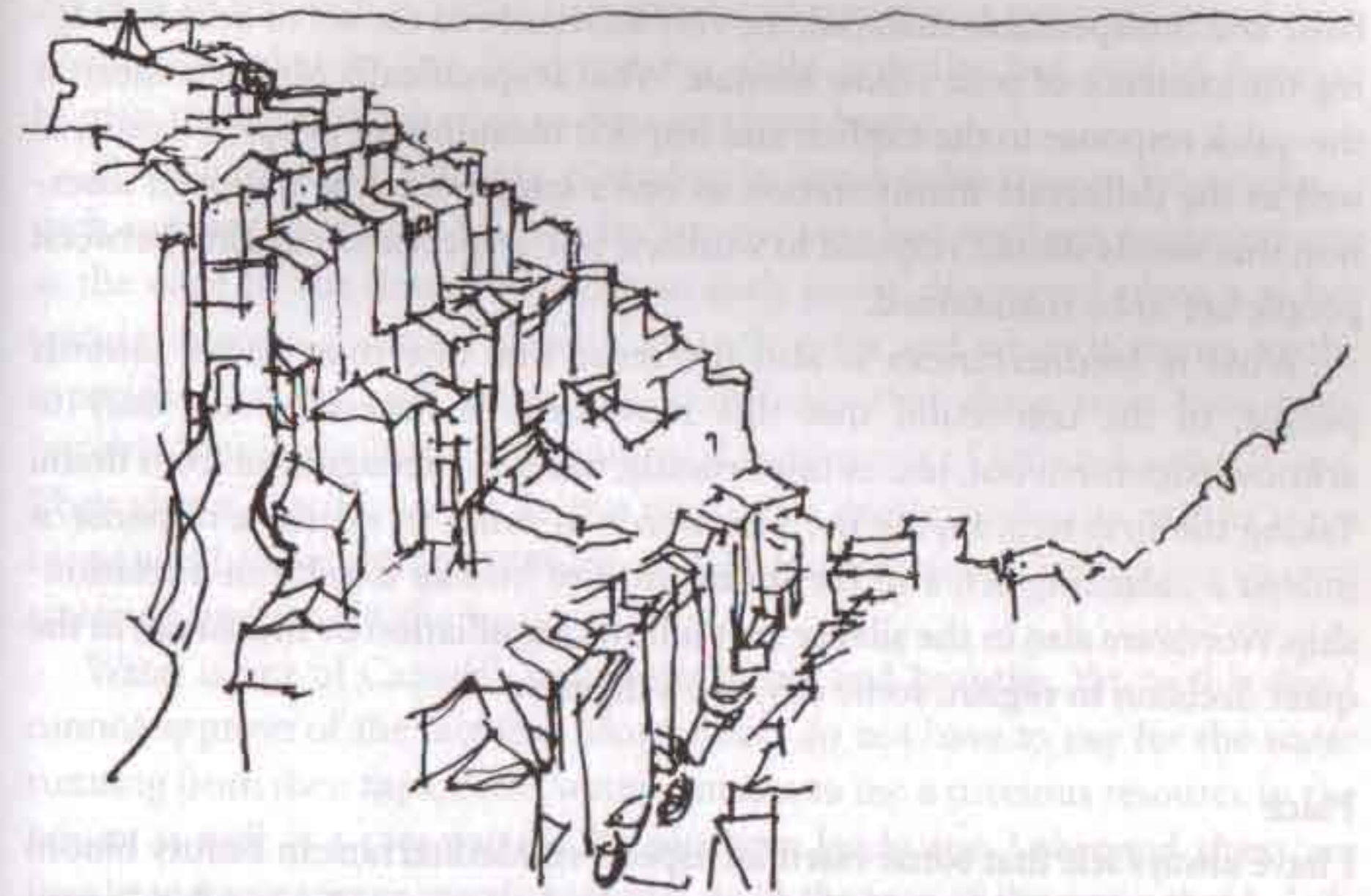


Fig. 1. "Mediterranean beauty". Manarola, Italy (B. Cold).

waiting outside beyond the walls. It is the light of the siesta and farniente, and, indeed, the true light of intimacy.

Thus Mediterranean beauty is in essence a rhythm, a movement that allows the withdrawal into homes and oneself before bringing people together, that requires them to take their leave, only to soon insist that they reassemble later, at the fall of the day (Fig. 1).

Words

To a foreign ear, I am told, talk among Mediterranean people sounds at times like quarreling, and at times like a song with too many peaks. Fast talk, dizzying talk, changing facial expressions, lively hands' talking, all Mediterranean, I have heard.

Everywhere in the world, talk is in the gaze and the smile, in the body posture and the movements of the hands, in active words as much as in silence. To me, Mediterranean beauty is the acute awareness that talk is the

basic and indispensable material, the very substance of the act of acknowledging the existence of your fellow human. What is specifically Mediterranean is the quick response to the explicit and implicit meanings of people's words, as well as the deliberate manifestation of one's sensitivity. It is the open assertion that words should respond to words, if self-respect and equality between people are to be maintained.

What is Mediterranean is also the sense that one must move towards people, in the conviction that this movement is necessary, not only to acknowledge them but, just as importantly, to receive recognition from them. Taking the first step, saying the first words in order to obtain a response is indeed a balancing act, and the foundation of human dignity in a relationship. Words are also in the silence that follows humiliation or the threat, in the quiet decision to regain, some day, one's dignity.

Place

I have always felt that some essential aspects of Mediterranean beauty bloom wherever around the world the sun - and what geographers call a "warm climate" - make people close windows early in the morning to keep the cool fresh air in like a precious possession, and to open them at night, dragging chairs on doorsteps, parading late into the night on crowded streets, before spending most of the night under the stars, submerged in the songs of cicadas.

I am fully aware that this kind of beauty that translates into the daily dance of people in and out of the houses and in the streets not only comes from the sun but is grounded in the Mediterranean sea. However, my intuition is that I would also experience some of its aspects and variations, for example, in South American villages, country homes and city neighborhoods, as well as in some southern cities in the United States.

Indeed, while in the Caribbean islands, in Mexico or Arizona, even in Kansas, I complained only indifferently about the blinding sun, the unforgiving heat, the slow pace of things, the nonchalance of people or the half-finished repairs to houses and hotels. For, in my heart of hearts, all these things happen in a warm place, under a hot sun, which are redeeming qualities in my eyes, not only because they make beauty what it essentially is, but also because they make such places at once foreign and familiar to me.

Because of this rich paradox I accepted and sometimes even welcomed with excitement what in fact hindered my daily activities but evoked familiar human patterns of behavior so far away from home.

Orange trees in California, oleanders in Israel, palm trees in Venezuela ... such encounters at once take me back to my long lost southern home in a city at the edge of the desert and give to each newly discovered place a richer texture, a more complex identity. In such cases and when it comes to the experience of my well-being, the knowledge that these trees have been imported for agricultural or ornamental purposes is of little relevance to me. They give a specific accent to the strange or exotic landscape, stir in me a secret and brief emotion, reassure me that Mediterranean beauty has its own scattered presence in the world.

Water is one of Canada's impressive riches and beauties. Yet, to this day, I cannot approve of the fact that Montrealers do not have to pay for the water running from their taps. Fresh water remains to me a precious resource in the house, as well as a rare part of the southern landscape. Lakes and rivers are fragile and sometimes merely seasonal, as in the case of the water that briefly rushes through wadis and disappears quickly in the soil. The powerful and vital images of the sea in Mediterranean countries does not clash with the deeply ingrained attitude of restrained use and appreciation of fresh water. Swimming in a Canadian lake or Norwegian fjord still gives me, after years of absence from southern countries, a sense of splendid luxury, the way Mediterranean fruit groves create a sense of plenitude. Indeed, the bounty of fruit is everywhere the result of adequate use of fresh water, but most particularly in Mediterranean countries where both remain, to some degree, miracles.

Yet, my keen awareness of the aesthetic qualities of Mediterranean places makes me a skeptical and partial visitor to many arid places around the world where some of these qualities are attained and even exceeded at great cost. At the core of this personal contradiction is my love of gardens. I approach arid places with the familiar knowledge and past intimate experiences of Mediterranean countries, where a shaded garden is a privilege and a prized possession, the essence of poetic longings and expressions of peace and intimacy, as well as the very translation of the oasis. It is from this experience that, for example, large expanses of lush parks and gardens, lawns, and flower

beds around institutional or corporate buildings in Arizona or California, and even homes, sometimes lend an air of dubious beauty to me. On the other hand, the evocation of the Israeli pioneers' legendary motto "make the desert bloom", I hold dear and admire in its applications, in spite of reservations I draw from my readings, in particular from Israeli literature. This "logical" contradiction is summed up by the fact that while I appreciate the beauty of vast lands rendered hospitable and fruitful, as for example in Arizona, and feel comfortable in its hotels and campuses surrounded by beautifully tended grounds, I am moved and exhilarated by a fuller sense of beauty at the sight of the Negev, comparatively tiny dates groves or the streets and lanes of its kibbutzim. This more intense experience – and the well-being that comes with it – is due in part to my sense that in the Negev the desert itself is still palpable, each oasis is narrowly self-contained, and the fragility of the place is still there to a degree.

North

I am happy in Norway. I have several good friends in Norway, and one great and close one there whom I visited during winter as well as summer. I have fond memories of winter weeks spent in Finland. I have frequently traveled to Denmark, each time with renewed pleasure and excitement. I have lived one memorable year in Sweden with my family, and I hold towards that country what may be considered an illegitimate sense of familiarity. I do not understand or speak any of the Scandinavian languages, but I can tell when Danish as opposed to Swedish or Norwegian is spoken, and this tiny link to those languages also gives me what is, doubtlessly again, an unjustified sense of familiarity.

Yet, yet ... legitimate or not, justified or not, I cherish this feeling because it stems from my discovery of an entirely different beauty which remains, in my opinion, blissfully half proclaimed in the world, in the same way a truly great poem is said in the simplest manner.

After the brief, fragile and precious dawns of the Mediterranean summer, its torrid mid-days and its black nights, the unexpected experience of the north's summer, its warm, flowing, much less rhythmic days and long white nights came as an exhilarating widening of my world. Hot summer days on

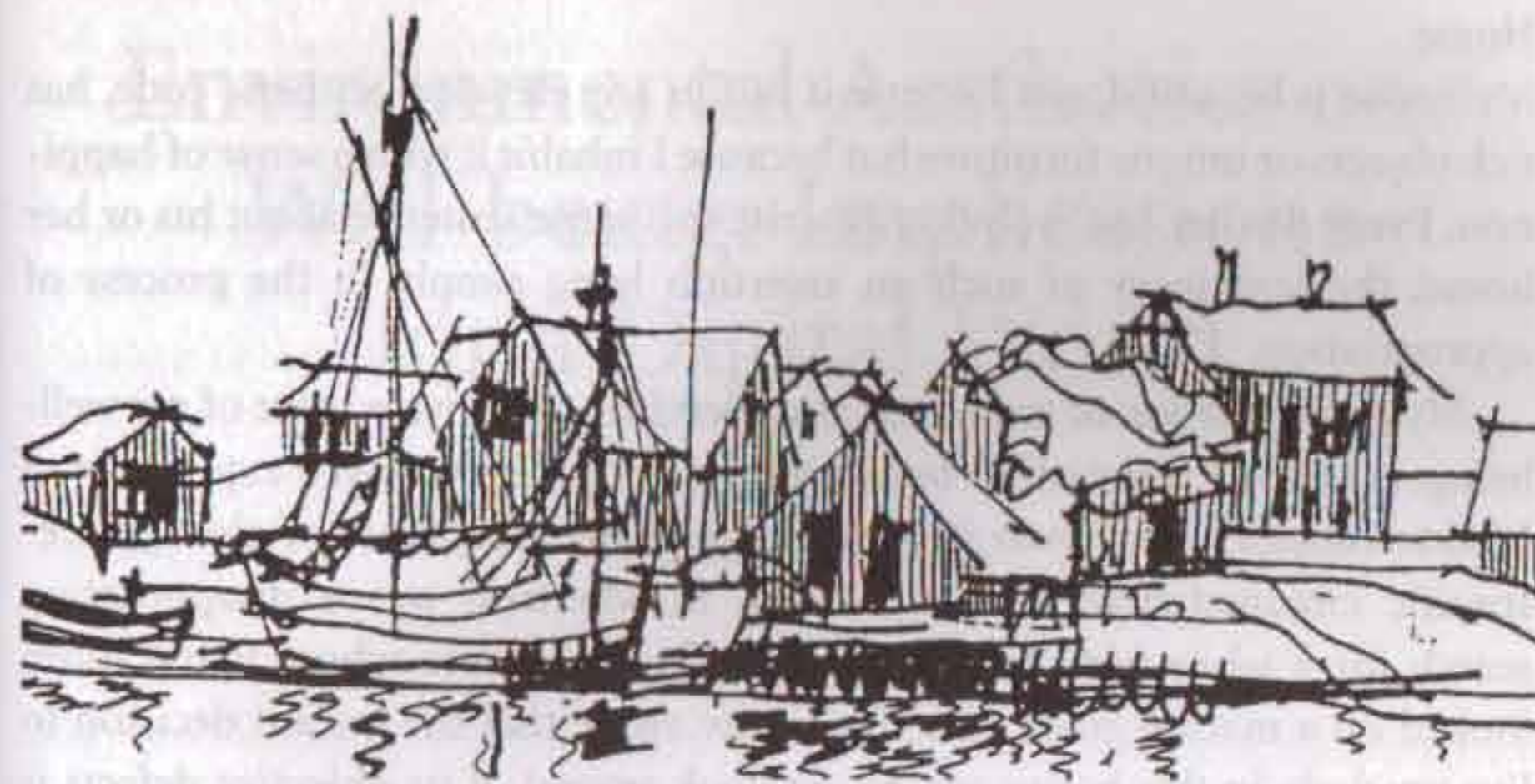


Fig. 2. Håholmen, an island not far from Trondheim, Norway (B. Cold).

one of the islands of Stockholm's archipelago did not absolutely require that I retire inside before mid-morning, and although the days were wonderfully warm on the islands off Trondheim, the water of the fjord was ice-cold. White on white, cold on hot, a continuous flow of time moving slowly towards the end of summer make the soothing beauty of the North (Fig. 2).

Luminous winters and falls, Canada's beauty is much more than that, but the consoling, calm and generous luminosity of its winter and fall days are at the core of my well-being in this country, as they counterbalance the length of the cold season. More than the objective coldness of the weather, to me, the long succession of short days and long nights is the real burden, for they require from me a full array of very small, sometimes hardly conscious daily efforts to appreciate my lot here and simply be happy. These efforts are obviously the backbone of my adaptation to this country, but they also are much more than that since they take me beyond nostalgia into the active absorption of Canada's beauty. Thus, even if my comfortable life in Canada has its edge of fantasies of sun-soaked Mediterranean cities, olive groves and parched countryside, it is sustained, even succored, by aesthetic qualities that are not evocative of them, but are place-specific and the source of dynamic experiences of a wide range of daily fleeting joys.

Home

My house is beautiful, not because it fulfills any elevated aesthetic code, has rich objects or unique furniture but because I inhabit it with a sense of happiness. Every dweller could obviously write this same sentence about his or her home, the legitimacy of such an assertion lying simply in the process of appropriation.

My appropriation of my home, and therefore my private sense of my well-being, is a subtle negotiation between my search for a renewed experience of Mediterranean beauty even in Montreal, and my acceptance of given, place-specific circumstances. House hunting in Montreal was a disappointing search for a while until I entered a sun flooded house whose living room looked on a mature grape vine. I am now aware that the instant decision to live precisely in this house and to overlook several of its objective defects is rooted in my sense of returning to the possession of the grape covered arbour in my father's garden, and therefore, in a symbolic way, to my southern childhood home. Anyone with an objective approach to the architectural qualities of these two houses would be at a loss to find any similarities between them. I do not find any either. But both homes have plenty of light and sun and an arbour that provides me with a sense of beauty and well-being. And, as I distribute around me the bounty of grapes at the end of each summer, I recall the acknowledgement of one's neighbor and the warmth and expressiveness that to me are the mark of southern human relationships, and it becomes clear to me that it is from the Mediterranean sources of my well-being that I can say that I live in a beautiful home, on a beautiful street in beautiful Montreal.