



*Written 25 Aug 10, for a "book of memories" for Mom, as she finally readied herself to sell 8447
~ Lou Host-Jablonski*

Searching back in memory to place 8447 in my life has been an oddly difficult assignment. I have not lived there for some 40 years (quite a bit longer in fact than the years I actually was an inhabitant). Despite this I know it very, very well, from corner to corner of building and property.

I can travel through it in my head quickly, and see it easily in great detail, in any condition and season of the year. It has moved and changed relatively little, and the changes make easy predictable sense. I know what the inside of the walls look like, what's original and what's been changed. I know where the brick was made and I know how they made the mortar and why it's still sound well into it's second century. I know the precise way in which the corbeled brick course protects the metal flashing, and I know the thickness of that metal and how much force it takes to bend it with my fingers. I know how it feels to go over that hump in the back of the house on a sled in winter. I can still somehow feel the difference in the subsoil where the original driveway went through the yard, and I can show you where it's edges still are, even though I know I was too young to remember seeing that old gravel.

It is House -- upper case. The archetype. All houses and indeed every building I have designed, remodeled or walked through begin with and in some way has it's reference to the House. The House is my personal omphalos, center of the world and birth-navel of my person. This is not a poetic exaggeration. To this day, when I need to recall compass directions and mentally place myself or any building on it's site and to know where the sun will rise upon it and where the winds will come from, I visualize the House. I adjust quickly for the angle of Lisbon Avenue, and know.

Every old house I inspect is in a real way a recapitulation of the House; every new house starts with the House as a base. The House is built into me in that way. It happens that the House was made at a time (in fact, right near the end of many millennia of little-changed construction practices) when we built "sustainably". We didn't know or use that word -- that was just how you built, naturally and mostly unselfconsciously. Of course materials were locally-sourced and in the main healthy. No toxic chlorine-based chemistry back then for caulks, paints or floorings; no insulations of asbestos, no plastics-laden composites.

Sure, the House builders could have done better with solar orientation and thermal detailing, but even in it's limitations, the House has lots to teach. In architecture school, one of my first house designs had a bathroom located off of the living room. The professor almost guffawed when he saw it, and informed me that this was very unacceptable practice. I shrugged and replied with my own experience of growing up, pointing out that our bathroom even had a louvered door! In this way I leaned something about house design, as well as something about architecture professors.

The House stands for me as an early, indelible lesson in urban design and architectural history, straddling as it does the American transition between the rural, suburban and urban, and our evolving notions of city-making and what constitutes a proper building. I can clearly contrast growing up in a substantial Place, hands-on and real, against my design contemporaries' fascination (bewildering, to me) with ephemeral 'style', image and abstraction.

At the House I learned playground design, turns out. In my third year as a young architect, when our office had the chance for City funding to design and build nine playgrounds, the other designers were nervous at the prospect. Whereas for me it was obvious and natural. Not because I was any expert at playground design (far from it), but because at the House we collaborated to design and build play-stuff all the time.

There I learned solar thermal design. Or at least the House gave me a working model ready-to-hand (well, ready-to-mind) to test whatever I was researching or learning about building behavior and materials. For example, the basics of thermal mass and passive cooling which I read about in books came instantly alive remembering how we'd pay attention to the sun and drawing the House shades in the Summer -- and then later paying attention to how other people's houses didn't work as well.

There I learned practical landscape design -- anyway, introductory courses in tree planting, maintenance, drainage, retaining walls and walkways. If 8447 is House, the burr oak is Tree. All trees. The best tree. Ours is a stalwart reminder of the survivors of prairie fires, a welcoming observer of everyone from long-dead Native Americans to first-time child climbers. It's not even ours; it belongs to itself, a citizen, which is of course much better.

I remember leaving the house in deep snow before sunrise on my paper route, when the world was all mine and I could still go Home. I remember learning to write in high school, establishing a lifelong pattern of staying up late 'til the house was quiet and then working 'til dawn, exhausted and satisfied to master something new. I remember endless streams of projects to make and abandon, and the freedom, facilities and support to take them on, fail or succeed,

and start another. I remember squabbles and fights, philosophical discussions, singing and storytelling. I remember uncountable meals, preparing, eating and discussing, so that House and Family are completely un-separateable concepts.

At this remove, approaching my 60th decade here, my young memories of the House are that of a fully complete and sufficient Place. This is no little thing; we have all met un-rooted souls for whom "home" has decidedly mixed meanings. There I learned that it's OK to stay in one place a long time, work and try to make a difference. And I've learned that this is a very important thing to give to the next generation.

Searching back in memory to place the House in my life has been an tough assignment, because it is with a bit of embarrassment that I confess that my memories of the Place are clearer than my memories of the People. At least more straightforward. This is not as bad as it sounds: because the imprint of the physical plant is so full, present and useful, that I have not "needed" the real thing for a long time. It exists and will exist now, forever. I can let it go, if not happily at least in peace and with much gratitude. Our business together is pretty much wrapped up. Unlike the people, my family, who are constantly changing and growing and to whom my person and identity is inseparable bound, daily. The lessons and connections there are of a whole 'nother order...

"Morning Visitors 1890" ~ imagined 8447 homestead by Lisbon Road, painting by Jan Jablonski

