

M O D U L U S 2 0



Stewardship of the Land

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Stewardship of the Land

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*Dedicated to
Bruce Abbey*

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Frontispiece: Rural Landscape, Madison County, Virginia.



There is an intimate and inextricable relationship between man and earth. The earth is the material source of man and all that sustains him. The extent to which we honor and respect the earth is the extent to which we are aware of our source and of our nature. Conversely, as we have alienated ourselves from the earth, so have we lost our self-awareness.

Building is a manifestation of man's relationship to the earth.

The context within which we build has come to be governed by individual, circumstance-based concerns. The discussion of values which transcend time and place, which address what is basic and essential to man, has become irrelevant to the practice of building. These universal values which sustain man's political and spiritual life have been replaced as determinants of design by economic standards which are quantifiable and therefore seemingly objective. We are unable to conceive of our environment holistically. Designers, along with the public, have become resigned to a system which is destroying our natural heritage. Building has become an act of imposition rather than of completion.

It is the intention of Modulus 20 to remind its readers not only of the sanctity of the earth and the depth of man's connection to it, but also to celebrate the opportunity that we in the design, planning and building professions have to act as stewards of the earth—to receive from our work the satisfaction of an appropriateness which runs incomparably deeper than the justification of maximum profit. While Modulus is a scholarly publication, the purpose of this issue is not so much to understand how we have come to be at odds with our world, as it is to take a stand and find ourselves at home within our world.

—The Editors

Introduction

Wendy Redfield Lathrop

The business at hand is a tricky one. The very phrase "stewardship of the land" is problematic. It brings to mind images of idyllic green pastures and trees, maybe a barn: the agrarian dream, sentimental and nostalgic (frontispiece). That's not what this issue of *Modulus* is about. It would be absurd and backward to suppose that returning to a strictly agrarian, rural culture—even if it were possible—would solve all our problems, or even make them go away. Neither is it strictly a tirade against pollution (both physical and visual), overdevelopment, and thoughtless design—although you will find anger in some of the following, and rightly so. It is far easier to criticize than to create, but the results of the latter are far more interesting, and lasting.

Further, the long and arduous history of the concept of nature as alternately related to, opposed to, superior to, inferior to, but almost always distinct from man seems to increase the difficulty of attending to the problem simply and directly. Certainly, it complicates it.

The following articles and projects seek to address the quality of settlement. The photograph on the cover depicts the most basic form of settlement: the marking on the land of a cross—the creation of *cardo* and *decumanus*. This timeless act, manifesting itself in a crossroads, or merely an intersection of four fields, is the act which orients man in the universe. Suddenly, there are the four cardinal directions and a relationship between points: man knows where he is.

But this is just the beginning. This marking of the land precedes shelter, building, architecture. Though ultimately profound, because it is timeless, because it is repetitive and symbolic to man: it is simple, even easy. Architecture is not. Architecture develops out of contingency: it is the reconciliation of the contingent and the eternal. The highest aim of architecture is to enhance and complete what has been naturally given. This can only be achieved with much thought and much caring.

Too often, we see the opposite; and too often, architects are responsible—or rather the irresponsible cause. We architects, landscape architects and planners are endowed with a unique and heady trust: to create a built environment which honors the natural one, which fulfills man's practical requirements while it embodies and represents his values, and, above all, which is beautiful. To make good this trust, we must begin to appreciate the landscape as a cultural, as well as an ecological phenomenon, and to view building as the creation of culture, rather than simply the satisfaction of a need for shelter or, worse, for profit. The work which this requires is not insignificant: let us undertake to do it joyfully.

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Frontispiece: Byrd Mill, Louisa County, Virginia, 1740.

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