

# Home Bases

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It could happen in a church. Martin Heidegger (2010) saw it in a Greek temple. A place we go. A building sits there on the earth, and as we go there, meaning happens. The building gathers our world together, teaching and disciplining our bodies, forming them in communal movements. It embodies, it realizes, it passes on our ethos. Our world of values and practices is confirmed; we become ourselves. Karsten Harries (1996) points out it needn't be a church. Politicians would like it to be a civic building and sometimes it could be a solemn courthouse or memorial, but often we don't feel quite at home there. We may feel an enforced obligation, unsure whether we should stand during the Pledge of Allegiance. Still, it can be a civic building.

Harries reminds us, though, that it could be a theater, or a park, a general store, or even a distinctive area of forest. What's important is that is *our* place, that we go there, we find ourselves, renew ourselves there. Will it be architecturally distinctive? Perhaps not, but at its best it should be, Harries says. It should be special and embellished. It should open and shape our lives by the ways it stands out among humdrum buildings, by its meaningful spaces. But it can open and confirm our world even if it is perfectly ordinary. In Portland Oregon, it could be a bicycle shed.

It could be new, but more likely it's been forming us for a long time. Our children have come there to be initiated (with or without ceremony), to learn (with or without realizing that they're learning). Meanings, values, roles, postures and practices have been passed on. It's our place, our center, home base. Then a group builds a Hindu temple in our suburb. It looks outlandish, something from National Geographic magazine. It is passing on ways of life, opening a world, but not ours. At first many may think "we were here first; we're the natives". Probably some of us still do. But after a few years, the temple has always been there, part of our community. We take its decorations for granted; our playmates long ago explained its symbols. Our children go there for Scout meetings and picnics.

Our world has become more complicated. There are other centers among us, rival, complementary, or just different. Our home base still confirms a world and its values, but it is no longer *The* center of *The* world. Do we feel the earth shaking, our identity no longer authoritative?

In the old days, we are told, an anthropologically perfect village would have revealed through its plan and assignments of tasks a vision of the cosmos, laying out spheres of life and their hierarchies. In the place of honor a temple or shrine would have gathered and anchored that seamless whole. We and our world would have been solid and complete.

People in those anthropological identity-confirming villages were probably aware of others a few valleys over who led different lives. Or they saw that beyond the edges of the plain around their great city different peoples were on the move. But we don't live in the New Guinea mountains or on the Mesopotamian plain. Our world is not so seamless. Something has changed in us now that we share a modern world with Others who are acknowledged in the middle of our public life. Being together with them, sharing common activities, changes our relation to our own home base. We may still feel at home there, but our lives are larger than what it defines. Also, in addition those many centers there are other kinds of places we all go to: the mall, the supermarket, the airplane terminal, the hospital, the campground, the highway. Those places do confirm, celebrate, and pass on common identities; we know their roles and rituals; we learn how to move our bodies there. But when we are shoppers or travelers or patients (or drivers, inmates, tourists) we pull back from the thicker identities we bring from our home base. Maybe I buy meat or wear a headscarf and you don't, but we share the role of shoppers. Mark Augé (2009) calls these shared places "non-places", because they don't provide the dense worlds of meaning opened by the traditional rooted places. The "we" who shares them is different, thinner, with slivers of non-identity and a new self-awareness.

But maybe those slim functional identities (travelers, shoppers, workers, drivers) are now who we truly are. It's tempting to conclude that those non-places have become our true homes, with the old dense home bases reduced to voluntary social clubs. Many people do draw that conclusion. But they are mistakenly clinging to the idea that an identity must be complete and single-ply. What makes us modern is that our selves no longer coincide with *any* solid definition, neither an old dense ethnic nor a new thin functional identity. There is always a sliver of difference, always more self-awareness. In G. W. F. Hegel's cryptic formulation, a modern self is "an identity of identity and non-identity".

Heidegger (1977) worried that all modern "identities" were decorations on the surface of one identity: functionaries of a drive to assert power its own sake in the efficient use of resources. Harries, who has a more supple, less totalizing notion of being and meaning, argues that there are still places that can open rich identities. We should defend those places and we should be building more, but Harries adds that we can never inhabit them with the imagined old solidity. I want to consider three attempts to build identity confirming places in our modern world. Each maneuvers slivers of non-identity in a different way.

*Villa Vizcaya*, in Miami, Florida, was built by James Deering (1859–1925), son of the founder of Deering Harvesters, which James helped lead until 1901, when the company joined with others to form International Harvester Company. James and his elder brother Charles were chairman and vice-president of the new company until a reorganization in 1909. Then James began building a villa in Florida near where Charles had purchased an older home. From 1909 through 1922 Deering and his friend and advisor Paul Chalfin raided European mansions and châteaux for art works, furniture, fireplaces, and ceilings, much as William Randolph Hearst would do a decade later.

Vizcaya surrounds an inner courtyard and faces east over a terrace that descends to Biscayne Bay. The other sides face formal gardens and subtropical forest. The villa was built after the pattern of Italian villas in the Veneto, but the home's individual rooms were decorated in many different 18th and 19th century styles (Empire, Biedermeier, Rococo, Neoclassical, Spanish, English, Venetian, Napoleonic).

A Venetian villa in sub-tropical Miami must deal with the local climate. Vizcaya's waterfront was protected by a stone ceremonial barge adorned with Caribbean creatures and classical references. Berms and ponds defended against high tides and storms. Reinforced concrete, elevators, generators, central vacuum, telephone, and fire control systems modernized the villa.

While local nature was acknowledged, there was little local Florida or Spanish culture in the big house, though a "village" for the servants was built in vernacular style across the highway. Twelve of that village's buildings still exist and are being renovated. The villa itself now belongs to Dade County. When we visited, brides and quinceañera teens were posing for photographs in the dramatic gardens. Vizcaya claims the authority of a master tradition. Deering and his advisers brought back aged Italian statuary for the gardens, to make the estate appear to have been lived in for generations. Furnishings were chosen to show layers of habitation. Born in a small town in Maine, Deering had become, along with his father and brother, one of the richest industrialists in America. He linked himself to the architectural language of Italian and French nobility, choosing antiques that testified to his education and taste. Deering's many guests (industrialists, theater people, and artists such as Deering's friend John Singer Sargent) enjoyed his grand entertainments and felt confirmed in their success as educated, cultured, in charge.

Back in Italy Palladio, and others had created villa patterns that asserted wealth and authority by fusing local agricultural building types with classical forms. Those patterns were later appropriated into other traditions, becoming English at Chiswick House and American at Monticello, giving birth to new traditions of their own. But Vizcaya's planners made little attempt to adapt their imported forms to the local scene, except for necessary protective measures. That refusal to adapt emphasized their claim to a superior identity. But it also promised a frisson of difference that made the villa fun to visit.

Like the Veneto villas it imitates, Vizcaya was a vacation home for a rich man who lived elsewhere most of the time. Vizcaya's residents and guests were



Fig. 1 Villa Vizcaya in 1955 (Charles Baron)



Fig. 2 The villa seen from the west garden (Anne Niemiec)



Fig. 3 Vizcaya sitting room (Victoria Magazine)



Fig. 4 Other Vizcaya interiors (Victoria Magazine)



Fig. 5 Vizcaya's breakwater barge (Anne Niemiec)

not European nobility self-assured in their centuries-long breeding. They were American arrivals sleeping in bedrooms named for and plucked from different historical periods with a cheery disregard for accuracy and coordination. They did not themselves inhabit a Biedermeier or Napoleonic period as their “natural” home. They hovered above, picking an appropriate bedroom or style in a “modernist” way, as passengers on a cruise ship might enjoy a Venetian or Spanish party night. A thin wedge of self-conscious play distanced them from the worlds they dipped into. Should we then say that Deering and his guests were just play-acting? We could, but only if we define play-acting as anything short of an imagined solid immersion in an unquestioned worldview. To be modern implies that distance and self-reflection should be accepted as appropriate in any identity. Anti-modern movements still strive furiously to reduce that wedge of non-identity to zero—no questions allowed!

But, as Hegel pointed out, to deny or repress something is to be constantly tied to and attentive to it. Avoiding threats to one’s identity demands vigilant awareness of precisely those threats.

Deering and his guests self-consciously used Vizcaya’s fanciful rooms as a more spacious stage than their business and professional spaces, so they could enjoy looser fun times. Meanwhile the villa’s strong historical links confirmed their feeling of superiority to the humdrum lives around them. (Fifty years later, self-conscious postmodernists would build and play similar games. They too would claim to be superior to ordinary people, not because of their allegiance to an authoritative tradition, but because of their ironic distance from all traditions.)

In polyglot Miami, Vizcaya seems an aristocratic whimsy, a snowbird’s home that Miami can be proud of for its luxurious revelation of a past world, but not as a center for Miami’s own mixed spaces. Around the same time that Vizcaya was claiming historical authority, le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright were developing a new way of building a home in the new world. They celebrated distance from past traditions, but then earnestly promoted a new self-created tradition. In 1936-39, ten years after Vizcaya was completed, Frank Lloyd Wright built *Wingspread*, in Racine, Wisconsin, for another successful industrialist, Herbert Fisk Johnson Jr. (1899-1978), grandson of the Samuel Curtis Johnson who founded Johnson’s Wax, and whose family’s fifth generation still owns and runs the company.



Fig. 6 Wingspread (SCJohnson)

Located a few miles from the Johnson company offices, *Wingspread* is no vacation home. It provided a wide common living space, dining and sleeping rooms, a nursery, play rooms, swimming pool, and was surrounded by gardens and forest with a nature path leading to nearby Lake Michigan. Herbert Johnson and his family lived there for 20 years. In 1959 the family donated the house to a foundation that has since used it for conferences and meetings. This house makes no attempt to link itself to European tradition or privilege. The last and largest of Wright’s prairie style homes, *Wingspread* makes few historical but many natural references. As the name implies, the house spreads four radial wings from a central dome/teepee whose height is coun-



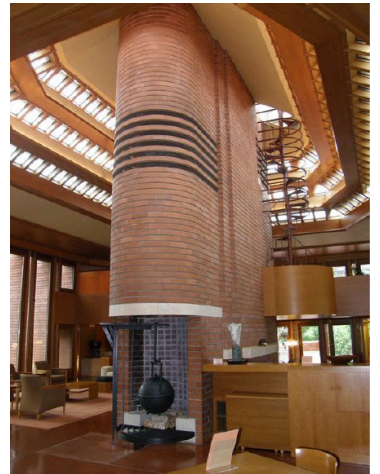
tered by horizontal bands of windows. Everything reaches out and long, from a high center whose hearth is itself divided into separate fires facing each wing.

There are Native American references in the shape of the central space and some European acknowledgments such as a “Romeo and Juliet balcony” for the children, but the house stands proud on its own, defining a new space by its own lines, opening outward across the prairie and upward free and clear. Wingspread proclaims a new master narrative: Promethean America creating its own story that spurns the past and joins itself with nature's striving. Wingspread celebrates the openness of the prairie, ready to move into an open future, drawing energy from local climate and nature. Wright's homes take different shapes from their locations: Midwest prairie, Pennsylvania valley, California hillside, and Arizona desert. Their intricate geometric proportions and designs promote a self-enclosed architectural language that needs no historical tradition to lend authority.

Wingspread succeeds in responding to the expansiveness of the prairie. But its dramatic gesture cannot claim the whole horizon, for it coexists uneasily with different gestures made by other nearby buildings in its residential suburb and industrial town.

Wright would have us acknowledge those others democratically, giving each its own space—provided only that the other centers align with his new American ethos. In his 1930s, Broadacre City proposal, Wright envisions an America where close-packed urban interaction is rejected and cities have been volatilized. Families are to live each on their own few acres with gardens and workshops, connecting with one another by radio and traveling to shared workplaces and institutions by fast cars on wide roads. Collisions of style or traffic are avoided. Our new home base is to be free from history, but no distance is to dilute its earnest embrace of a new universal vision. Wingspread is more authoritative and demanding than Vizcaya. Harries insists that we must acknowledge our modern dimensions of non-identity. Can we then still build home bases that impart a strong identity? We can, Harries says, but only if we stop pretending we can make willful social constructions from scratch. When we appear in the world and to ourselves, we are already on the move, involved in projects, traditions, languages, ways of living and building that we did not choose. We can revise and change them, yes, but not from some detached neutral platform. This is an environmentally nuanced version of Heidegger's notion of human existence as “thrown project”. We can see this receptive, less authoritative, project at work in architects like Alvar Aalto, and in the projects of the many landscape architects who make few universal claims yet take up local nature more intently.

The *Sítio Roberto Burle Marx at Barra de Guaratiba* (50 km east of Brazil's Rio de Janeiro) offers such an enriched landscape. Roberto Burle Marx (1909–1994) was the first Brazilian landscape architect to feature native plants rather than European imports, and to create patterns unlike European gardens. Seen from above and in his drawn plans, his curling, swooping garden beds resemble abstract paintings.



Figs. 7 and 8 Wingspread's central space (Architectural Daily)

**Fig. 9 (Right)** Burle Marx's design for park in Rio



**Fig. 10** Pond beside a Sitio path (David Kolb)



**Figs. 11** Along a Sitio path (David Kolb, Anne Niemiec)

**Figs. 12 (Right)** Wall made from demolition fragments (David Kolb)



In 1949 Burle Marx purchased the Sitio da Santo Antonio da Bica, a 365,000 m<sup>2</sup> estate. He renovated its traditional house and chapel. He gradually transformed the surrounding forest; the result was not a series of formal gardens but a landscape you might think wild until you realized how every sightline, every contrast of texture and color had been thoughtfully designed. Burle Marx rearranged local plants and trees, adding others from elsewhere in Brazil, so that while his land appears at first glance to be a neater version of the surrounding forest, in fact it gathers all of Brazil together. The Sitio supplements and manipulates local nature so that it appears more natural, more present, than in its “natural” state. The original house faces a lawn and pond Burle Marx designed to include a fascinating wall he composed from frag-





**Fig. 13 (Left)** Front porch of Burle Marx's residence (David Kolb)

ments of demolished Rio buildings. The house itself was not deeply modified, but its long porches and high ceilings were already in dialogue with the local forest and climate.

Behind the house, Burle Marx constructed a covered pavilion and party space centered on his striking red tile mural and facing designed gardens. The pavilion brings flat roofed geometrical modernity into the lush landscape, going Philip Johnson one better: no walls at all. Its roof holds a shallow pond that allows a curtain of water to flow over the edge.

Towards the end of his life, Burle Marx was adding a studio building set behind a skeletal facade he saved from a favorite Rio building. There he placed workspaces, his large paintings, tile art, and sculptures from his own and others' hands. He arranged for the government to take over the Sítio at his death. They have protected the property, adding a bland administration building near the entrance. Tours are allowed but only at limited times under strict supervision. Like Wright, Burle Marx makes no attempt to connect his new designs with an authoritative past. But unlike Wright, he does not assert a new transcendence. His gardens neither challenge nor serve other narratives. In opening new possibilities in dialogue with local landscapes, he creates spaces for a renewed Brazilian identity that does not take itself too seriously. Modern dimensions of distance are acknowledged as ordinary, nothing special. He takes up creatively his natural setting, encouraging others to respond creatively to their different times and localities.

Though they began as home bases, today, only Burle Marx's Sítio still functions to confirm a local identity. Vizcaya and Wingspread have become stage sets for events celebrating other identities than those they were built to promote. While identity-confirming places benefit from being architecturally distinctive, if they stand out too much, they threaten to become touristic spectacle. Famous shrines such as Saint Peter's in Rome or The Blue



**Figs. 14–17** Pavilion, with views to three sides (David Kolb)



**Fig. 18–20** Burle Marx's patio water curtain  
(Monty Don, BBC)

Mosque in Istanbul show that a place can both attract tourists and yet also confirm a community's ongoing identity. However, at Vizcaya its non-identity expanded so that no one feels at home; the villa became an exhibit, life styles of the rich and famous. Wingspread wields its non-identity from historical styles, but tries to keep its new American identity solid and secure. Non-identity reappears, though, so that the house now displays not a promised new American identity, but only Wright's personal vision as opposed to those of other planners and architects. The Sitio showcases Burle Marx's design genius, but it also opens a new way to build with nature. No one lives at the Sitio now, but it is not a static museum. Burle Marx's plans are carried forward, and altered, by a new generation of gardeners and visitors with renewed commitment to its way.

I've tried to show by these examples how a mixture of identity and non-identity can enhance rather than destroy a sense of being at home in the worlds revealed and confirmed by built places. We can still build bases that stand on the local terrain, unafraid of being one of many. This supports Harries' view that a plurality of home bases need not introduce a struggle for dominant authority. If there is no solid peak to stand firmly upon, why play king of the mountain?

This does demand, though, that we accept an uneasy slice of non-identity as normal, since disunity is part of what it means to be unified. For me this point is best put in the Hegelian terms I have been using, identity and non-identity, while Harries prefers Heidegger's language of strife and tense interplay. There are important differences between the two philosophical approaches (see Kolb 1987 and 2007), but both agree in condemning as unrealistic and doomed to failure the many attempts today to enforce solid single religious and cultural identities.

## Author

David Kolb grew up mostly in the New York City suburbs, studied with the Jesuits in New York and Maryland, received his PhD in philosophy from Yale University, taught at Fordham University, the University of Chicago, Nanzan University in Japan, and Bates College in Maine, as the Charles A. Dana Professor of Philosophy. Since moving to Eugene, Oregon in 2006, he has devoted himself full-time to writing and lecturing. He has published on modernity in Hegel and Heidegger (*The Critique of Pure Modernity*, University of Chicago Press, 1987), postmodernity in knowledge and architecture (*Post-modern Sophistications*, University of Chicago Press, 1990), architecture and planning (*Sprawling Places*, University of Georgia Press, 2008, and on the web), as well as many articles on Hegel, architecture, and digital writing.



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