

Phenomenological Place Study

Places we want to *live* in must both function materially *and* nurture the soul, sustain *us* spiritually as well as being materially and biologically sustainable. (Christopher Day, *Spirit & Place*, p, 91)

Human Beings have a powerful relationship with nature: nature carries, supports, and nourishes us, but we also have the ability, through our thinking and willing, to intervene in the natural processes and alter their course. Human activity can dominate, distort, and destroy natural environments – and we end up with places that are ugly, inhospitable, or even make us sick. But human activity can also respect, understand, and enhance natural places.

Our Place Study is an attempt to attune our minds to the qualities of place, allow our senses to explore, and connect our interest and care to the natural areas that surround the building. The goals are

- ❖ To listen to what is there and what wishes to be there in the future
- ❖ To discover how we can enhance the natural features of the landscape
- ❖ To bring a healing quality to the places that the children encounter every day
- ❖ To respect the shared destiny of humans and nature
- ❖ To develop a vision and guidelines for the development of the grounds

Places affect us in ways that we are often not aware of: they speak a subliminal language. We would like you to set aside your professional expertise for now and attune yourself to what the place says to your senses, to your limbs, to your heart, and finally to your mind, and approach the grounds with the openness of a child's wonder.

Please contact us if you have further insights or questions or suggestions:

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Day 1: Walking and Observing the School Grounds

1. **First Impression** (15 minutes): Approach the school in your normal way, walk around the property, and note your first impressions in the journal. This reveals something about the essence of place before we get confused by details.

Short Debriefing Session

2. **Deepened Perception and Description** (25 minutes): Follow your first impression and explore an element of the place that stood out to you either positively or negatively. This can be anything from a *quality* of the place as a whole, a *specific location* that speaks to you, a *question or problem* the place poses for you. Try to attend to all the features of the place through your senses:

- ✓ What do you see, hear, smell, touch?
- ✓ What kind of movement of your body is made possible by the place?
- ✓ What do you notice about the features of the place?
- ✓ How does it shape your perception and attention?
- ✓ How do you feel? What mood do you encounter?

Use your journal to describe and explore your experience of the place. You can use drawings and even photographs to clarify and illustrate your perceptions.

Debriefing and Conversation Session

3. **Attention to the Elements**: Visit “your” place again and this time observe the elemental forces of place at play:

- **Earth** as the *material element* that supports life, its substance: how does the ground anchor and support human structures and activities? What is the material structure of the place? --- Can you imagine an enhancement?
- **Water** as the *flowing, changing, gesture principle*, the fluidity of its living relationships: How does the energy of the place flow? What gestures does it make? How does it enliven our energies and dissolve our rigidities? --- Can you imagine an enhancement?
- **Air** and the scents and sounds that evoke feelings: what *moods* do you encounter? How does it change with the seasons and time? --- Can you imagine an enhancement?
- **Fire** and warmth that *inspire* and transform places: how does the place nurture social life and the soul? How does it touch, protect, and inspire children? --- Can you imagine an enhancement?

PEI and the Elements: The Larger Context of Children’s Life Here



Evening of Day 1: Meditative Exercises at Home

4. **Imagination.** Between our workshops we ask you to do a simple meditative exercise tonight and notice changes in your awareness:

Picture “your” place in your imagination:

- (Earth) Imagine the physical place—let it go
- (Water) Imagine the place in movement/gesture—let it go
- (Air) Imagine your first impression or mood of the place—let it go
- (Fire) Imagine what the place inspires in you – let it go

Keep noting in your journal some of your insights:

- What forms and events have appeared through your process of observing and imagining your place?
- How does your place change in time?
- How does it connect with other places and events?
- How does your place fit into the whole?
- Are there guiding principles that apply to the place as a whole?
- Can you imagine your place change through an enhancement?

5. **Inspiration:** At the end of the meditative process we ask you to think the place from the perspective of the place itself (listen to the spirit of the place) and see its potential:

What does your place say to you?
(write a sentence in your journal)



Day 2: Artistic Activity and Place Enhancements

6. *Artistic Activity:*

Please use the piece of paper, which is in the shape of a circle, to create a symbol of the spirit of the place. Choose any artistic media or materials you feel drawn to--pencil, crayons, pastels, pens. Evoke the intuitive quality and identity of the place in your mind and create an image in the circle (it can be a symbolic picture, a flowing gesture, colors etc.) that symbolizes the spirit of the place for you. Please bring your circle and pin it to the Place Map.

On the back, please write in a sentence what your place is saying to you?

7. *Envisioning exercise on the future of the grounds (30 mins, outdoor, groups)*

Please go to this place, walk around together for a while, and find a place to sit and talk. Have a conversation about the following list of considerations **and keep notes of your conversation on a sheet of paper:**

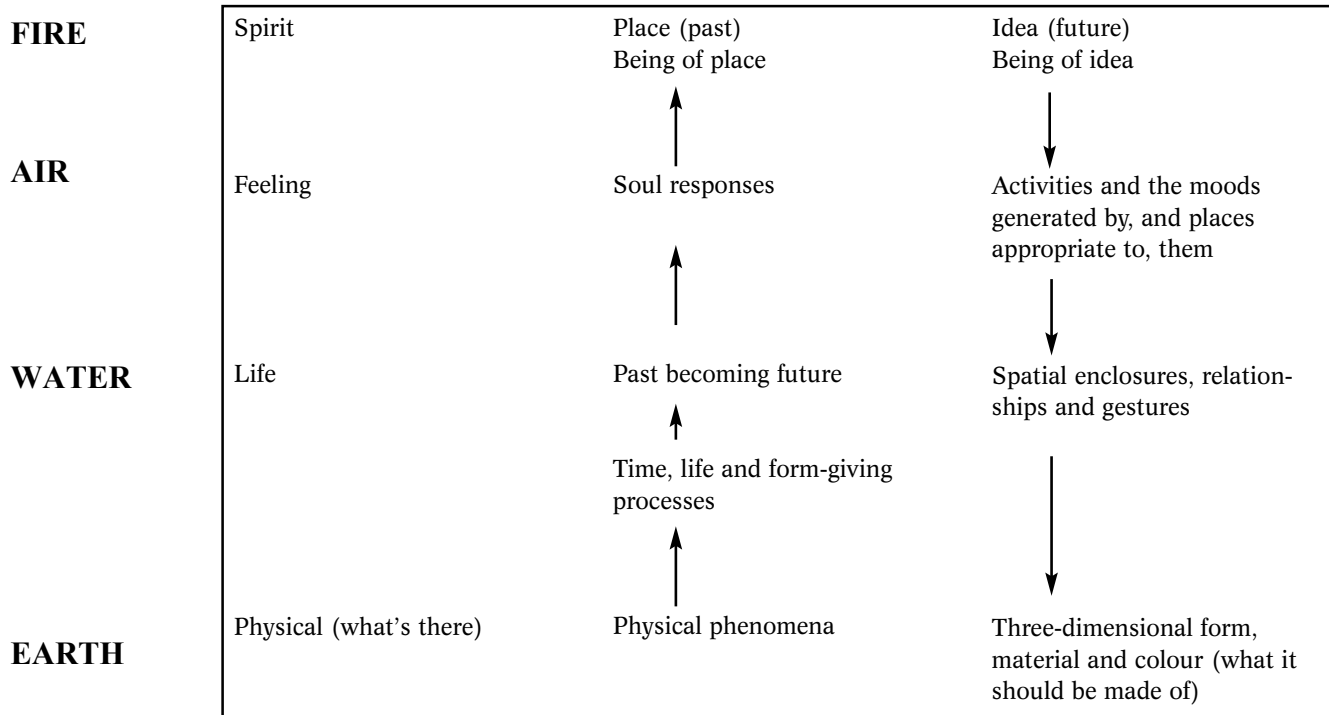
1. **What *did* the place say to the participants (check Mandalas)?**
2. **What *should* it say? (this is an exercise that tries to listen to what the place itself suggest for future development)**
3. **What changes are possible and appropriate in order to enhance this section of the grounds?** The questions below do not have to follow an exact sequence (sometimes an idea is pretty clear, sometimes a gesture comes first). Try to stay open to the flow of the conversation and don't get lost in planning details:



- A. – **Which ideas want to live here?** What is needed to enhance and balance the fire element?
- B. -- **What moods and activities are appropriate here?** What is needed to enhance and balance the air element?
- C. --**What kind of spatial enclosures, relationships, and gestures can achieve this?**
What is needed to enhance and balance the water element?
- D. -- **What material changes would achieve this?** What is needed to enhance and balance the earth element?



Overview of the process (following Christopher Day, *Spirit & Place*)



The paintings of the landscapes of Prince Edward Island are by Rhode Island artist **Tim Tait**, who lives and paints on PEI in the summers. For more information please visit his website: <https://www.timtait.art>

