I, Chloe Bennett, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture in Architecture.

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Dwelling By The Bay: Cultivating Genius Loci for Houston's Gulf Coast

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Dwelling by the Bay: Cultivating Genius Loci for Houston’s Gulf Coast

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by

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Abstract

Despite a growing neglect for place architecture in the contemporary worldview, the subconscious experiential and psychic importance of places in shaping our firsthand experience of the world has not decreased as society has continued to speed down the track of modernization. The homogenization of place through globalization, introduction of digital “place” and motivations of capitalism have together catalyzed a reductive design formula streamlined for perpetuating merely superficial projections of nostalgic place-images. The complex relationships and qualities of places cultivate the capacity for human dwelling, which is the primary means by which humans understand the always already present meanings and contexts of their lived situations within the inexhaustible background of our human existence known as the lifeworld. By revealing the genius loci, or spirit of place, through a continual ontological process of interpretation known as hermeneutics, it is possible to engage a dialogue between place and audience capable of addressing unique local conditions such as culture, history, geography and environment through the work of place architecture to uncover and augment spontaneous meaningful experiences within the lifeworld.

The architectural qualities of character, materiality, tectonics, and multisensory experience will be studied on a site located on the gulf coast of Houston, Texas to frame architectural responses capable of taking up place-based tradition hermeneutically while asserting a progressive architectural position, in effect uncovering the genius loci through architecture that is simultaneously reflective and reflexive. This approach will be applied to the design of a community sailing facility and public campground that embodies the genius loci, foregrounds meaningful experience hermeneutically, and promotes the essential qualities of dwelling.
As humans, we gain knowledge through various modes of experiences. Whether in the classroom, within relationships, during travels, or through vivid dreams, these experiences form the bedrock of human life, containing a complex set of truths and meanings that are endlessly connected to each other and which are always already influencing our daily interactions in an unthought way. These experiences are qualitative phenomena, things that cannot be abstracted or objectified, and they form the contexts of our existence. Places are also qualitative phenomena, containing the same inexhaustible depth of meaning and relationships and contexts. Architecture, and the discourse of architecture, tends to promote objectification as a method of describing and categorizing its goals and motivations, when in reality, these abstracted conditions or situations do not exist, and may never correspond or illuminate knowledge already gained through direct experience. Places, and the buildings within them, are overflowing with concealed significances that shape the deeply embedded contexts of our unconscious dwelling in the lifeworld, where dwelling can be understood as the universal character of human existence. To meet this end, architecture must engage a purpose which lies beyond function, empiricism and objectification, in order to contribute meaningfully to the existential space where life takes place, and to contribute to the richness of environmental characters and experiential qualities that are encountered spontaneously on a daily basis. As a form of expression that is born out of context, it is the responsibility of architecture to consider its relationship to the meanings already embedded in the lifeworld, and its places, and how dwelling already occurs there, and on that basis evoke and contribute to an explicit hermeneutic process of uncovering, or intensifying, the sense of genius loci, or spirit of place. The interconnected natures of place, dwelling, and lived experience drive this thesis.
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There is a growing feeling of discontent within our society. Expectations are higher, attention spans are shorter, and the ideals of capitalism have mushroomed into an unavoidable circumstance of our contemporary world. The way we dwell has changed, but the nature of dwelling has not. Our physical, concrete sense of place is being homogenized through the rapid pace of globalization and consumerism, and further estranged from the everyday world with the introduction of the "place" created by digital media. To resist a growing sense of indifference and superficiality to the making of place, to reconnect and reinvigorate an awareness of places with the depth of relationships, traditions and meanings that are always already there to open up the capacity for humanity to dwell poetically within the lifeworld, a reassessment of the role of the genius loci is necessary.
1.1 | Genius loci of Seabrook, Texas at different times of day.
THE SPIRIT OF PLACE

Christian Norberg-Schulz advocates for a return of the Roman concept of *genius loci*, the spirit of place, in his essay “The Phenomenon of Place.” His claim is based primarily on the essence of place as having an “environmental character” made up of material substances, colors, shapes, and textures. These places are structured as concrete things within the lifeworld, total entities embedded deeply within contexts that allow for a presencing; it is only through this presencing, this uncovering and shining forth of the place-thing, that dwelling, “becom[ing] friends with” a particular place, can occur. One of the primary understandings of place is that there is a distinguishable inside and outside, the relationship of which is known through opening that allows the inside to be experienced as a complement to the outside. This complementary relationship establishes the true problem of dwelling – the human confrontation and engagement with the “other” of his environment, which becomes manifest through character and ultimately genius loci.

Genius loci is defined as “the spirit of place,” structured by space and character. Space is defined relative to a boundary, which the Greeks noted as the thing which begins the edge of presencing for a place. It is through the boundary that the space comes into being, and through the openings of its boundary that the inside and outside are determined and brought into communion. It is also from this bounding of space that character is created. Character, the basic mode in which the world is given, is the thing that Norberg-Schulz notes as the primary impact of a place, saying “when we visit a foreign city, we are usually struck by its particular character, which becomes an important part of the experience.” Place, space, and character are like parts of speech to the structure of the genius loci, communicating the importance of each different component to the creation of a complete

1.2 | Seabrook, Texas is enmeshed in one of the largest and most active recreational boating communities in the United States.
entity. The correspondence of these aspects to the basic structure of human understanding is critical to orientation and identification, the two psychological functions of “the total man-place relationship.”

Places may be contained within other places, a concept Norberg-Schulz calls “environmental levels.” Through these environmental levels man is able to reconcile the natural with the man-made by visualizing his understanding of nature, using symbolism to translate this understanding into a different medium, and ultimately gathering all the understandings together to create a microcosm, the concretization of his world. Visualization, symbolization, and gathering are also known as the process of settling, the immediate precursor to dwelling. However, dwelling cannot occur within the boundless realm of nature; there must be a boundary from which to create presence to dwell within. A place must be created. There are many sites on land where this place may begin to take root, and by gathering together the understandings of these sites of nature and concretizing them, place is created. That is to say, ultimately, that the making of a site into a place, the uncovering of present meanings in an environment, is the existential purpose of building architecture.

THE PROBLEM OF DwELLING

What does it mean to dwell? How does building belong to dwelling? These are the premises of Martin Heidegger’s essay, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking.” Asserting that the primary goal of building is dwelling, but that not every building is a dwelling, the concept of dwelling is introduced as to be at home and to have shelter. Man can inhabit the world without dwelling, and buildings can exist in the domain of dwelling, understood as the lifeworld, or the space where life takes place, without in themselves being dwellings. The primary
1.4 | This sign marked the entry to the town after crossing the drawbridge connecting Seabrook with the town of Kemah.

1.5 | Tall marsh grasses characterize the coast of Seabrook.
interest lies in the verbs of building and dwelling rather than the nouns, a discussion that in effect becomes a debate of the chicken or the egg. Heidegger states, "to build is in itself already to dwell" in tandem with the claim that "we do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell," that is, we have always already experienced the lived-world as meaningful over time. This calls into question the natures of building and dwelling and the way in which one depends on the other for its happening.

It is simpler to start with the architectural aspect of this discussion, which is building, defined by Heidegger as "a founding and joining of spaces." Existential space, within which humans are always already embedded, is in its most simply understood state, unbounded. It exists. It contains things within its landscape. Its character as given by its shape and environment and relationships forms a sense of place. However, man does not recognize this space until it becomes a location, specified by boundary, which provides a threshold for the space to begin its presencing, or its becoming clear and explicit to our understanding. Without building and boundary, space uncontained belongs only to itself, but upon arriving at a bridge over a creek, for example, or a post marking a trail, there is location, orientation, given through the action of building. The process of acknowledging, arranging and bounding raw existential space creates a site, prepared to become a location through construction. The abstract process of construction is contained within the concrete action of building, realizing existential space by organizing it into other, multiple, additional spaces out of that which was always already there.

Building is a preserving and sparing of existential space, nurturing and cultivating its possibility of becoming a location through the bounding, organizing, and constructing, that permits the admitting and installing of man within the situation. Through this admitting, installing, founding and joining of space, building is revealed as a letting-dwell. Letting-dwell by building "is to say that in dwelling [mortals] persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locations." Important to all of this is the implication of time, and the nearness and intimacy that comes by man’s persevering of being. This, the universal condition of man’s being-in-the-world, is dwelling.

If the act of building is dwelling, but not all buildings are dwellings, how is it that building becomes dwelling? The key lies in the line Heidegger borrows from Holderlin, "poetically, man dwells..." Poetry, the interactions among words, language, rhythm and style, has the capacity to uncover the universal human condition of being-in-the-world, which is made up of things embedded in contexts and relationships and meanings that are inseparable and always already subconsciously present in everyday life. Dwelling, the revealing of the way in which humans exist, embedded amongst, in constant interaction with and inseparable from, everything else, is therefore understood as poetic. To be in the world with things thoughtfully is to dwell poetically, and so "poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building." The problem that poetics present to architecture is the way in which they remain unaffected by reality, detached from outside contexts and carefully designed to give meaning, opposed to the nature of how man dwells in approach but parallel in concept. Architecture is, in a simple definition, the design of buildings, and as such, contains the capacity to compose the interactions between situations and audiences in the same way that poetics compose language into meaning. By this thinking remains, regardless of the conditions of reality, the capacity for building that cultivates dwelling poetically. Yet the issue has become that "when there is still room left in today’s dwelling for the poetic, and time is still set aside, what comes to pass is at best a preoccupation with aestheticizing." Beyond such superficial object aesthet-
ics, the concept of dwelling can be reintroduced to present conditions as a way to mend the gap between this superficial preoccupation and poetics, uncovering genius loci through architecture that reveals over time, to thoughtful interpretation, the essential qualities of place.

HERMENEUTICS + ENGAGEMENT

This thoughtful interpretation, in the contexts of time and tradition, is hermeneutics. This new way of dwelling has occurred as a product of time, adding, as time does, many layers of meaning and relationships that enrich our way of always already being-in-the-world. Unfortunately, the distance of today’s motives from the hermeneutic nature of an engagement with the world has increased its superficiality, and we are as a result subjected to glib projections of “place” that capitalize on a shallow novelty rather than a hermeneutic understanding of meaningfully lived situations. As modernity has facilitated human control of the external world, design thinking has progressively turned away from tradition and art toward economics and production, resulting in an inability “to simultaneously engage the recurrent and thematic workings of history with the circumstances peculiar to our own time.”

The Greek concept of theoria was originally rooted in the worlds of human perception and experience; modern architecture theory has become a thing of academic invention, far removed from the needs of its users and the intentions of its Greek forefathers. Architecture, as a product of place and culture, has traditionally sought to “critically reconcile the historical with the contemporary, the eternal with the moment, the universal with the specific.”

We have witnessed modernity “become increasingly estranged from a sense of traditional and poetic value,” subsequently becoming complicit in the notion that “architecture can do no more for us than it already does, because
hardly anybody has seen a modern building that does do more.”¹⁹ In William Hubbard’s view of the postmodern world, not only is there no ambition for architecture that engages with our everyday lives, but there is no impulse to come close enough to architecture to even wonder why it is the way that it is. The reality is that well-intentioned and possibly once contextually relevant architectures have been flattened into cool reproductions of place-images which are now so abstracted from their origins that they have overblown the capacity of their architectural convention, replacing it with a sentiment of defeated inevitability.

The universal nature of hermeneutics, the neverending cycle of interpretation by which the world is given in response to unique situations with specific circumstances, becomes a model for architecture as the most straightforward way to engage a re-cognition of place that is attuned to its interwoven relationships with culture, tradition and history. This can be also understood as a re-injection of everyday societal conventions, tried-and-true patterns established from desires and choices rather than inevitability, into buildings, allowing reality to penetrate architecture and rediscover its power to engage “direct aesthetic experiences of the real.”²⁰ The continual happening of tradition opens up a capacity “to find new joints of meaning between our ancestry and our future.”²¹ The hermeneutic approach can continually evolve, renew its relevance and cultivate interaction in a way that transcends time, trends and statistics. By uniting the conscious process of making architecture with the unconscious inevitability of the hermeneutic process, architecture can be infused with both the contingencies of everyday life and the requisite situational slippage, opening to its interpretive capacity through the poetic work’s engagement of conscious thought and “dwelling,” becoming a link through past and future.²²

CRITICAL REGIONALISM

Our present global situation is evidence of the fusion of regions and cultures, often blended slowly and imperceptibly, and just as often haphazardly collaged on top of and next to one another in an effort to construct some expanded value of traditional meaning. Architects Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre proposed critical regionalism as a way to construct means for an architecture that aims to defend against the complete obsolescence of region, and recommits itself to “placeness.”²² This desire to bring architecture back from the realm of the universal to specific, from the transnational to the local, was in reaction to the same issues addressed by hermeneutics. What differentiates critical regionalism from previous regionalist movements is the import of the term critical, as in knowing the shortfalls and limits of the tools being used. By such stipulation, critical regionalism questions its own premises and outcomes to continually reinterpret its “region”, effectively articulating and reasserting a group identity through negotiation with the past and traditions through a fresh and “critical” hermeneutics.

This recommitment to “placeness” seeks to frame “a use of regional design elements as a means of confronting a universalist order of architecture that is seen as dominating or oppressive,”²³ and in addition to remove the stigma whereby the term “place” refers to specific ethnicities and national insularity. Through a process of defamiliarization, a poetic device which opens up a process of hermeneutic engagement and re-cognition by incorporating “place-defining” elements in strange or displaced ways, the potential arises for a dialogue between building and viewer. The process of defamiliarization disrupts the sentimental familiarity of elemental experience, and perception, now de-automized, must be reformed in “a process of hard cognitive negotiation in place of the fantasized surrender that follows from familiar-
The viewer becomes a participator in “a metacognitive state, a democracy of experience” in which they are brought to form new associations and meanings of the familiar elements that have now been revealed to them in an unfamiliar, unbiased light.

Notes

2. Ibid., 6.
3. Ibid., 21.
4. Ibid., 14.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 19.
8. Ibid., 144.
9. Ibid., 146.
10. Ibid., 156.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 155.
15. Ibid., 211.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 115.
20. Ibid., 84.
23. Hubbard, Complicity and Conviction, 149.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 489.
27. Ibid., 486.
For this thesis, it is important to recognize the distinct differences between method and approach. A method describes a linear cause-and-effect based process, rooted in obtaining objective and measureable outcomes. The necessity of predetermination for this process to be successful results in a product that is the counter of what this thesis is after. Rather, the goals of this thesis prescribe an approach, a perspective of thought from which to interrogate from and receive answers. This approach becomes a conversation between student and teacher, observer and actor, architecture and place, designer and audience. The conversant, hermeneutic approach is cyclical, allowing with each turn for perspective to shift, for understanding to grow, and for increasing nearness to uncover previously unknown meanings and relationships. Such an approach will lend itself to a sort of slippage in the design process that is analogous to the inexhaustible nature of the lifeworld, an essential component for creating an architecture of place.

By investigating those things which structure through their interactions a "place", it is possible to engage the cyclical hermeneutic process of discovery requisite for achieving the multiplicity of interpretation and the specificity of experience required. These components—defined as character, materiality, tectonics, and multisensory experience—facilitate a dialogue between audience, architecture, and place that uncovers the genius loci.
Character

“Character is at the same time a more general and a more concrete concept than ‘space.’ On the one hand it denotes a general comprehensive atmosphere, and on the other the concrete form and substance of the space-defining elements. Any real presence is intimately linked with a character.”

In “The Phenomenon of Place,” Norberg-Schulz reflects on a poem by Georg Trakl entitled *A Winter Evening*, demonstrating the facility poetics have to describe the qualitative nature of place through spatiality, familiar imagery, and mood. This effect is one Norberg-Schulz calls *stimmung*, or character, which creates a background for experiences to take place, as well as a space for things to take place within. Character serves to concretize the ephemera of situations, “determined by how things are, and gives our investigation a basis in the concrete phenomena of our everyday lifeworld.” *Stimmung* understood as a synonym for character uncovers additional layers of meaning; translated from German, it is defined as “attunement” or “mood.” Character takes on an emotive quality, a connection which communicates moods of a place and the affect that this mood has on the audience’s being in a place, and as such, is described by adjectives.

Norberg-Schulz defines the concept of existential space as composed of space and character, which pair respectively with the essential psychic functions of orientation and identification, essential components to how humans experience places. Identification, which relates to character, is important in architecture because of the interpretive nature of human existence within the lifeworld. Interpretations are based on experiences that are known, contexts that are familiar, and, in general, things that are referent to other things which are interpreted to be referent to still other things. Character is created through these
identifications of familiar relationships and meanings. The stronger
the sense of identification with a place through the subversive means of
characters and moods, the more rich with meaning a places becomes,
as more capacity for engagement and dwelling is opened up.

The relationship between place and character is intimate. The
transition from the basilica as the primary public space in Roman life
to the basilica as a Christian church is related not so much to form, as
the two are based on the same plan structure, but to the character of
the place. Thus, it is fair to assert that "different actions demand places
with different character," and such character is determined immedi-
ately by the "constitution of the place" and how things are there, how
the thing itself is made, built, or otherwise brought to technical real-
ization.6

"In general we have to emphasize that all places have charac-
ter, and that character is the basic mode in which the world is
given."7

MATERIALITY

Materials, while a fact of the physical world and of architecture,
do not in many cases lend themselves to a transparency of what they
are. They have been standardized through the process of construc-
tion for economy and versatility rather than for architectural affect,
obstructing audiences and architects from experiencing an apprecia-
tion of the natural origins of material substances—their formation,
manufacture, traditional uses, and cultural meanings—which limits
the ability for architecture to engage with its place. Materiality is the
presencing of a material’s poetic qualities through architectural expe-
rience and context,11 revealing the hermeneutic nature of the lifeworld
which "reflects our intuition that for something to be real it ought

2.3 | Tectonic elements of sailboats create moments of anchoring, floating, tying and hanging.

2.4 | Porches create place for community as well as protection from the heat.
to be (made of) ‘stuff,’ material having a palpability, a temperature, a weight and inertia, and inherent strength.” Natural materials in particular have the inherent ability to express their origins, history, age, and traditional human uses, carrying through past and future a narrative of place. Kenneth Frampton describes the importance of materiality in Alvar Aalto’s Sayanatsalo Town Hall:

“The kinetic impetus of the body in climbing the stair is thus checked by the friction of the steps, which are ‘read’ soon after in contrast to the timber floor of the council chamber itself. This chamber asserts its honorific status through sound, smell, and texture, not to mention the springy deflection of the floor underfoot (and a noticeable tendency to lose one’s balance on its polished surface). From this example it is clear that the liberative importance of the tactile resides in the fact that it can only be decoded in terms of experience itself…”

Here, the characters, tectonics and multisensory experience of material combine to uncover something deeper than the materials themselves, materiality, which adds a rich layer of understanding necessary to the uncovering of genius loci through architecture.

**Tectonics**

“As Semper was to point out…the history of culture manifests occasional transpositions in which the architectonic attributes of one mode are expressed in another for the sake of retaining traditional symbolic value, as in the case of the Greek temple, where stone is cut and laid in such a way as to reinterpret the form of the archetypal timber frame. In this regard we need to note that masonry, when it does not assume the form of a conglomerate…when it is bonded into coursework, is also a form of weaving, to which all the various traditional masonry bonds bear testimony.”

For a work of architecture to be hermeneutic, tradition and culture must remain infused with the narrative of the building. The quote above from Kenneth Frampton illustrates the role of the tectonic in the preservation of regional or cultural traditions, reinterpreting traditional building methods and techniques toward modern materials and execution. Marco Frascari mirrors this sentiment, recognizing the tectonic detail as expressing man’s process of attaching meanings to objects he produces, meaning “the details are then the loci where knowledge is of an order in which the mind finds its own working, that is, logos.” He is interpreting the tectonics “within culturally definable modes of construction and construing, a process which opens up the capacity for the genius loci to emerge. The way in which materials and elements are joined in a functional and aesthetic manner can work to presence place-specific meaning and knowledge through the work of architecture, and the success or failure of a work can be determined by a very subtle misunderstanding of the tectonic’s translation between one work and another.”

“As the selection of words and style gives character to the sentence, in a similar way the selection of details and style gives character to a building.”

**Multisensory Experience**

“Every touching experience of architecture is multi-sensory; qualities of matter, space, and scale are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle. Architecture involves several realms of sensory experience which interact and infuse each other.”
The knowledge we as humans have about the world is a product of memory, formed by first-hand experience. In the recall of a place where dwelling has occurred, such as a childhood home, the first memory is not of the discrete path of the sun across the site or of square footage calculations, but perhaps of how the draft would come through windows during the winter, or the smell of a pillow when falling into bed at night. To model architecture after environmental information ignores the impact that spaces have on our bodies and senses in the form of personal or cultural memories. What is needed is to reconfigure how the body, the environment and the senses engage with architecture in order to generate associations that remain in memory, in essence evoking the spirit of the place.

As humanity has progressed, the once recessive sense of sight has emerged as the dominant force in our experiences of the world, while touch, sound, and taste-smell sensorial networks—once the dominant senses for navigation, verifying safety, communication, et cetera—have fallen out of consideration as place-experience factors. The smell of home has no emotional or experiential substitute, and is unique to each place that one might refer to as a home throughout their lifetime. Sound, likewise, engages at once "our affinity with the space" by its omni-directional nature, becoming "emotionally charged because the sound reverberating from surrounding walls put us in direct interaction with the space; the sound measures space and makes its scale comprehensible."

The sense of touch was, in classical times, split "into five sensations: pressure, warmth, cold, pain, and kinesthesis(sensibility to motion)." Hapticity is unique in that almost all of the time, doing and feeling occur simultaneously, and the perception and experience of place is impacted immediately and subconsciously by how the body boundary expands and contracts relative to spatial orientation, proximity, and boundary. Meaning is assigned to buildings based on how the body moves through and impacts the space—the heavity of a door, the squeak of rubber-soled shoes on a ceramic tile floor—and thus the body "gives fundamental meanings to visual experiences, while visual experiences serve to communicate those meanings back to the body."

Additional to the sensory experience of architecture and place is time. Architecture, which bounds space as a means to cultivate human dwelling, does the same with time, "enable[ing] us to inhabit the continuum of time." The aging of places is a gradual process that serves as a visual and sensorial catalogue of history and tradition, providing tangible aspects to facilitate understanding and engagement between past, present and future. "The patina of wear adds the enriching experience of time; matter exists in the continuum of time." Through infusion of multisensory experience as an essential part of place, genius loci can be uncovered.
NOTES

2. Ibid., 8.
3. Ibid., 10.
4. Ibid., 16.
5. Ibid., 5.
6. Ibid., 14.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 15.
17. Ibid., 24.
18. Ibid., 23.
19. Ibid., 24.
23. Ibid., 37.
24. Ibid., 35.
26. Ibid., 35.
27. Ibid., 43.
28. Ibid., 44.
This approach will be applied to the design of a community sailing center and public campground with the goal of uncovering genius loci and cultivating the capacity for dwelling. By engaging the multisensory nature of human experience, the poetics of the tectonic, the impacts of materiality, and the thingness of character, the work will be infused with the capacity to bring forth bodily, sensory, mental, and emotional engagements through the work of architecture. The design process will be applied through four primary perspectives - tradition and culture, environment and geography, tectonics, and materiality. Through the exploration and development of these four, it will be possible to uncover the rich meanings and contexts of the place through the architecture of the sailing center and campground.
The client for this facility will be the City of Seabrook, in partnership with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation (TPWF) and the Greater Houston Community Foundation (GHCF), two of the primary funders of public recreational developments in the greater Houston area and Texas Gulf Coast region. All parties share an interest in enriching the lives of the general populations of their localities, as well as reinforcing the important histories, cultures, and other aspects unique to their place-specific situations. While the Open Space and Trails Committee (OSTC) of the City of Seabrook as well as the TPWF emphasize the beautification and preservation of natural and cultural resources alongside the planning and management of recreational facilities in their mission statements, the GHCF is concerned with convening resources to address community needs and operates under the premise of nurturing and renewing community in the Greater Houston area. The GHCF states comprehensive, customized philanthropic solutions and opportunities for high engagement philanthropy as components of their value proposition, and describes its primary purpose as love of community. The clients and the thesis study share mutual interests in local history, cultural preservation and relevance, enhancement of natural resources and landscapes, and the overall augmentation of the everyday experience of life for community members and visitors. The client-institution relationship is thus positioned to leverage the full potentials of the site and program in terms of allocating the appropriate resources and staff for the project’s actualization and maintenance and creating mutual incentives for cooperation of all the design, planning, and political entities involved.

The community sailing facility is being commissioned to serve as the primary waterfront recreation, sailing education and coastal campground facility in the greater Houston area. Most entities of this type
are operated by the private sector and require steeply priced memberships; these access restrictions limit the ability of the institutions to fully engage their audiences. By creating this facility as a venue within the public domain that is supported at the local and statewide level, it will be able to have an open and evolving role within the community. This political relationship in partnership with the philanthropic aims of the GHCF will also ensure that there are ample resources, financial or otherwise, to provide for the maintenance of the complex and the programs and services it will offer.
The site is located at 4810 Todville Road in Seabrook, Texas. This particular tract of land extends east from Todville Road, a major thoroughfare in Seabrook, to the Galveston Bay, including in its plot a significant portion of the bay itself. The considered portion for the design occupies only 20% of the designated lot, and comprises the area occupying the waterfront as well as the key topographical feature of the site, a steep hill that separates a narrow stretch of land along the waterfront from the rest of the grounds. The site is very close to two large public parks, Pine Gully Park and Robinson Park, as well as the Seabrook Wildlife and Refuge Park. This location makes it an ideal candidate for integration into the Seabrook parks system, and this capability is already noted in many Seabrook city hall meeting minutes and other municipal documents. On a regional scale, the site is nested between the Houston Port Authority to the north, NASA’s Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center to the west, Kemah Boardwalk to the south, and the Houston Ship Channel offshore to the east. These landmarks of tourism, commerce and culture are of huge importance to the greater Houston area and the gulf coast. Despite the small town feel of Seabrook and quiet nature of the site, it sits as a central point amongst a very thick context of industrialization, modern technology and commerce.
This area of Galveston Bay was once occupied by The Orcoquisac tribe, a part of the Atakapan nation (Atakapan means man-eater in Chocktaw), who lived on the lands surrounding Galveston Bay, and were probably the Indians that Cabeza de Vaca encountered in 1528 when coming to Galveston Island. By the time Stephen F. Austin came to settle the area in the 19th century, they were gone, possibly killed off by Comanches. They left in their wake huge middens, or heaps of shells, resulting from the discards of the oysters that sustained the majority of their diet. One of the largest middens is in Pine Gully Park a half mile north, although much of it has been washed away or destroyed by natural disasters.

Accounts of land ownership are muddled from the 1820s until 1895, when Seabrook Snyder, the son of a prominent land developer in the region, purchased the land and began to develop and promote sales of property. The first residents of Seabrook, established in 1903 after the devastating Galveston hurricane of 1900, were primarily summer residents who arrived on the Suburban, a twice-daily commuter train operated by the Southern Pacific Railroad. William Scott, then president of the Southern Pacific Railroad in Texas and Louisiana, built a concrete, mission-style mansion on the site in 1910 which came to be known as Deepend. It was one of the first homes built along Galveston Bay, and had been called “the most distinctive mission-style residence in the state of Texas” by the Texas Historical Commission. The home was purchased by the Girl Scouts of San Jacinto Council in 1958 and converted into the main structure for newly established Camp Casa Mare, where it was used as a dormitory until its demolition in 1992.
A study of historical maps of the site in sequence shows that the coastline has undergone a great deal of erosion within the past century. This erosion is due in part to the continuous dredging of the nearby Houston Ship Channel, which completes its route 2.5 miles north of the site in La Porte, Texas. This makes the sediments of the bay at the site very loose and the water is murky, although mostly free of debris and seaweeds. Rock barriers have been constructed to maintain the shoreline of the majority of the grounds, absent only on the marshy ground that forms the southern edge of a promontory on the northern edge of the site. The buildup of sediments from dredging makes the bay very shallow, and low tide levels can leave large swaths of the bay dry and exposed along the rock-fortified shore until high tide returns.

There is little natural shelter from sun and wind; on site vegetation consists of sands and grasses, and the few trees found are small and do not provide much shade. Portions of the site do lie within the designated flood plain area. The site is prone to flooding, and hurricanes, although rare due to geographical particularities, have affected the site. The last hurricane event was in September 2008 with the landing of Hurricane Ike, a category 4 storm which decimated nearby Galveston Island and Bolivar Peninsula. Seabrook experienced damage from strong winds and a storm surge, but the island and peninsula to the south protected Seabrook from the most adverse effects of the storm.
5.5 | A hurricane in 1941 destroyed landmark establishments on Seabrook’s coast.

5.7 | Hurricane Carla in 1961 was recorded as a Category 5 storm with a 22 foot storm surge.

5.6 | 23 tornadoes were recorded during Hurricane Alicia in 1983.

5.8 | Hurricane Ike in 2008 had a 17 foot storm surge that completely obscured Seabrook’s coastline.
**Topography**

The hill on site creates a strong contrast of spatiality on the land, forming a sense of compression and closeness along the shoreline, and extending the views outward with a sense of altitude when standing on top further back on the land. This dramatic difference in feeling occurs within a fairly short distance on the site. From the bay, the view into the land grows shallower as you approach from open water to shoreline, creating a sense of entry and harbor for boats to be docked and for sailors to transition from water to land. The hill makes the site feel sheltered, providing enclosure and protection along with vantage points.

**Ecological Concerns**

Two immediate concerns for Seabrook are coastal habitat restoration and storm protection. The Houston Ship Channel is speculated to have caused wetland habitat destruction in Seabrook, mainly in the Pine Gully Park area. Galveston Bay has experienced an extensive loss of marshland, which Seabrook is capable of restoring in parts. Pine Gully Park to the north is currently undertaking an expansion and sediment removal of the Pine Gully Channel. This expansion will improve drainage and alleviate flooding in the area, and will help manage runoff from the expansion of State Highway 146, which is undergoing expansion in the south of Seabrook approaching Kemah. This project will also allow for the restoration of some wetland habitats that have been damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Ike and activities related to the dredging of the nearby Houston Ship Channel.

There are several community concerns listed in the The Seabrook Open Space & Parks Master Plan. These concerns include preservation of ecological heritage, a waterfront park and boat launch, preservation of night darkness (no additional light pollution), full integration of the park trail system, maintaining waterfront views, and continued enrichments of habitats for local birds and wildlife. This site is noted by the city as one ideal for integration into the Seabrook parks system, due to its proximity to the bay, Pine Gully Park, and Seabrook Wildlife Refuge. Seabrook’s coastline is, for the most part, only accessible through private residences along the waterfront. There is a public boat dock in the south portion of the city, which requires a use fee, and a public accessible waterfront and fishing pier at Pine Gully Park. This site’s proximity to Pine Gully makes it ideal for integration into the realm of the city’s public parks, allowing for the public waterfront to expand in both area and amenity.

Seabrook is considered by its city officials and residents to be a bird sanctuary. White pelicans and a growing number of brown pelicans, an endangered species, nest along Galveston Bay in Seabrook. Other local species include herons, hummingbirds, ospreys, and various songbirds. Cedar waxwings, buntings, and various birds of prey are found passing though during the spring migration period. Design considerations for maintaining and promoting local bird habitats can be found in the parks master plan.

5.9 | Seabrook is a popular destination for birdwatching.
**THE PROGRAM**

The program of the community boating center and public campground facility was broken down into a series of activities, which were then subdivided into specific programmatic/audience subcategories and indoor/outdoor spaces. Each activity was then regrouped into an umbrella “entity” which reflects the audience or facility most suited to addressing the needs of each activity. From this, the primary programmatic entities are as follows:

- Community sailing center - workshops, exhibit + event space
- Boathouse
- Cabins (rentable)
- Waterfront

**THE BOATHOUSE**

The boathouse is a utilitarian facility primarily used to store sailing equipment, with additional spaces for equipment repairs and cleaning. It is intimately involved with the senses of sight, touch, and sound. The boathouse is the beginning and ending of the daily ritual of labor undertaken by the sailor. It should be practical and minimal, containing only the elements necessary for the performance of the tasks at hand, facilitating access to equipment, promoting safety. It should be responsive to the environment, permitting daylight to filter in and illuminate the tall, open space, allowing the breeze and the scent of rain and salt and freshly mowed grass to permeate, mingling with the sweat of the sailors and the slow, even drip of freshly washed sails. It should be beautiful, in the sense that the boathouse is a temple for the equipment, gathering together the things held in standing reserve ready to perform at a moment’s notice.
**THE EVENT SPACE**

The event space is an open, flexible entity with the potential for a variety of functions. The transient character of the event space contains both emptiness and amplification; it is a vessel constantly filling and emptying with the changing of uses, moods, and time. It is a space of gathering and conviviality, of community and purpose. It should include indoor and outdoor portions, framing views across both thresholds and establishing an intimate relationship between the earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. It should cultivate the everyday in a way that engages its spontaneity and beauty. The event space should serve as a filter between inside and outside, work and play, disaster and blessing, engaging in an endless cycle of receiving and radiating the everyday in harmony with the phenomenal.

**THE CABIN**

The cabin is a residential unit, a private enclosure of space in a public realm, a refuge held between sky and earth. The cabin, in the capacity it opens for dwelling, marks a primary threshold separating an outside from an inside, conjoining a man-made settlement out of a natural landscape, becoming a foci which gathers together man and his environment. The cabin opens up the capacity for man to dwell, gathering together the familiar amongst the always already, possessing a character of peace, of stillness, of protection. The openings of the cabin determine how its boundary forms the inside and the outside space; they provide man with a perspective from which to orient himself and identify with his situation, sheltering him from the environment while simultaneously exposing him to its environmental character. The cabin should feel familiar, comfortable, and warm. It should impart a mood of physical and psychological security; it should have the capacity to instill spiritual calm and inspire exploration and activity.

**THE WATERFRONT**

The waterfront is a universal condition of the site, influencing its topography, climate, character, mood, and activity. The waterfront marks the boundary from which the site becomes present; it is both the beginning and ending of the horizon, and marks the primary boundary between natural place and manmade place. The bay is held between the earth and the sky; the boats skimming the surface, the fish beneath the waters, the buoys tossing amongst the waves, are all suspended between, simultaneously rejected and embraced by both. This phenomenon – a type of floating with compression, or tensegrity, or dynamic equilibrium – manifests the transition between heaven and earth, mortal and divinities; water is always already being exchanged between earth and sky, to man from the divinities, baptizing the soils and the rocks and the sands and reflecting the clouds and the birds and the sunsets. The waterfront is the genesis of the genius loci, an embedded pulsation between action and quiescence that irrefutably verifies the subconscious way man lives and breathes, and ultimately, dwells. The world of the site is given by the bay and the shore. The design of the waterfront should manifest these relationships, reacting to its temporal subjugation to the dynamic landscape.

**THE DESIGN**

Formally, the design is made up of separate buildings with a limited variety of program in each. This is intended to emphasize the effect of the program on the experience of place and uncover mean-
ings that are mostly analogous as given by the functions occurring. The complex is formed by three building types—the boathouse, the community sailing center, and the cabins. Emphasis was placed on the exploration and manifestation of environmental levels within the complex and within each specific building type.

The first step of the design sequence was to extract and apply the subconscious knowledge acquired through an upbringing in Houston, Texas, through my own experiences in Seabrook, and my memories of camping and sailing in this place. These learnings tell most deeply of the local tradition and culture formally, environmentally, aesthetically and functionally. During this process of recollection, each building began to take on a specific character relative to its use and meaning. There came to be three types of buildings—the educational pavilion, or community sailing center; the storehouse, or boathouse; and the dwelling, or cabin.

Educational workshop spaces, administrative facilities, and open community space were combined into one building, the community sailing center, which is the largest building on the site. Southern building traditions use the porch, the dogtrot, and the shotgun style building to mitigate the effects of hot climates and draw breezes through. The porch and the dogtrot also bear social significance as semi-public zones where people can gather, held comfortably where the thresholds between building and community overlap. Combining these three traditional forms resulted in a building volume that accommodates a long porch zone fronting the bay while also channeling transverse winds through each space, and forms open community space within the dogtrot. The site unfolds from the bayfront screen porch in a series of cascading steps towards the water, engaging audience with landscape and bridging the space between the natural and the manmade.

The boathouse, a utilitarian facility requiring high ceilings and secure storage for sailing equipment, necessitated a protected location with efficient access to the water for people, cars, and boats. A long, narrow volume embedded in the slope of the site forms two levels of boat and equipment storage, opening up a passage between the land and the water. Retaining walls anchor this building and the two drives north of it that permit car and boat trailer access to the waterfront across the steep ridge. The boathouse marks a transition in the site between the land and the water. It is a vessel for storage as well as passage, marking the beginning and end of the ritual of labor that is part of every sailor’s day.

Traditional waterfront residential architecture in the gulf region of Texas is raised up on stilts, given a large porch and private drive, and lined up on a semi-private road that accesses the water. This particular area exaggerates on some of these traditions. Elevations above sea level permit homes to rest on the ground, but many homes come complete with a pool, and waterfront access is privately owned. To presence the experience of dwelling by the bay, the traditional stilted homes with large porches were reinterpreted into a long pier inhabited by a row of cabins. Interstitial zones between cabins serve as private porch areas, while the walkway and open pier spaces become public porches. From these initial volumes, environmental realities were considered in the orientation and functionality of each building in order to maximize wind and daylight while also protecting against heat and hurricane conditions. Each building is designed to operate comfortably with natural ventilation and daylighting. Also taken into consideration was the permanence of each element on the site, understanding that tropical storm conditions often affect the shape of the coastal built environment.

The tectonic of the architecture began to develop as a contrast between anchoring elements, such as retaining walls, posts and columns embedded into the ground, and the elements which were tied
to them – the piers suspended between dock posts, the walls strung between thick concrete walls, and the shapes and opacities of the various architectural elements were designed with the understanding that in this context, the affect of time on buildings produces destruction, but also unearths ruins which are then used as the foundations for rebuilding and reinterpretation. The vocabulary of sailing and its relationship to this place infuses the architecture with expanded tectonic value; the ideas of anchoring, tying, floating and hanging, present in every aspect of sailing, give meaningful contrast and animation to architectural elements that works to engage the audience with the architecture and presence the genius loci.

The final step in the design process, presencing materiality, was essential to intensifying the poetic quality of the architecture and place. Drawing from the naturally present materiality of the site, a palette of stone, glass, and wood was determined early on in the design process, but it was important to maximize the affect of each to engage the design with the multisensory aspects important to the experience of dwelling. Stone elements anchor and shapes spaces with their weight and hardness, protecting any contents within and exposing the elements without. Wood piles are driven like trees into the earth to form docks and piers, strung between with planks to form pathways across the site and through buildings. Wooden posts and planks are strung between the concrete and steel structure of the sailing center, separating inside and outside, permitting its scent and texture to manipulate the changing light, temperature and humidity of the day within each space. Glass takes on the various conditions of water, ranging from calm and clear, to rippling and filter-like, to diffuse, prismatic, or mirrored. Rough concrete and the various qualities of woods are punctuated by slick steel elements reminiscent of the masts, trapezes and cleats that give shape and animation to waterfront locales.


