

Walking Around Consciousness: Reading In the Medieval Cloister and the Art of Richard Long

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Someday there will be an open recognition that there is no inherent separation between the religious or spiritual divine, science, agriculture, and the other domains of humanity. These are all variations of the human endeavor, implicate and interacting with each other.

– Edward Bruce Bynum, *The African Unconscious*¹

INTRODUCTION

Walking is a fundamental human activity and a persistent characteristic of the human. Walking engages the body in a range of experiences, and bodily experience underlies all concept making ability and rational thought.² Yet automobile culture obscures contemporary walking in general, and in the design disciplines the importance of walking is overshadowed in particular by the growing dominance of visual and virtual culture. In a previous essay I explored how four practices, *sighting*, *measuring*, *reading*, and *merging*, inform how we walk in the built environment, whether we walk as designers or as citizens.³ *Sighting* is the process by which the walker understands the relationship among physical objects in the landscape. In *Measuring*, one walks to determine dimensions and relative locations of objects. *Reading* involves identifying and naming features of a landscape and making sense of things through narrative. *Merging* involves heightened consciousness and generates understanding of, and sensitivity to, the land.

This paper further considers the walking practice of *reading* by comparing two apparently divergent walking situations in the work of the artist Richard Long and the medieval monastery courtyard. These two examples embrace mundane and cosmic consciousness, each bracketing a range of experience between the extremes. The subject of this paper, then, is neither the monk, nor Long, but rather human consciousness as it is reflected in the act of *reading* landscape and architectural text.

Spiritual value and human consciousness – longed for virtues in the contemporary consumer landscape and feared lost, or at least threatened, by major commentators since Benjamin – arise, in these divergent examples, out of walking and reading. The contemporary reader – one inclined to read texts, even old ones, as “open texts”⁴ – finds an invitation to increased consciousness in each example.

On the surface the cloister and Long’s art appear to be mostly opposite in every significant way. The cloister represents communalism. Long’s art represents individualism; the cloister represents enclosure and separateness, Long’s art represents openness and integration; the cloister represents imprisonment, Long’s art represents freedom. The cloister is dark, Long’s art is light. The cloister is Christian, Long’s art is secular, pagan, “new age,” and environmentalist. The cloister is symbolic, Long’s art is formal. The cloister is medieval, Long’s art is modern. Finally, the subject of the cloister is human nature encountered in the text of scripture and sculpture, the subject of Long’s art is nature encountered directly in the text of material. In these readings the experience of the text is of the utmost importance to the consciousness of the primary reader – the monks or the person Richard Long. In both the example of the cloister and the example of Long’s art, advancement of consciousness is the result of encountering the text again and again over time.

Both examples demand of their primary reader repetitive interaction over a long period of time – perhaps until the very end of life. Both examples, to borrow Bakhtin’s useful phrase, create *chronotopes* of the experience of the monk and the artist – chronotopes in which the dramatic tension or quest is concerned with spiritual knowing, enlightenment, or the heightening of consciousness.⁵

The chronotope, as Bakhtin’s borrowing from mathematics and Einstein suggests, compounds time and space into a single

image of a character's existence in a story. The chronotope is an image of mere physical existence over time coupled with dramatic potential—whether tragic, comic, transcendent, or redemptive. It is from within the chronotope that human dramatic tension yields insight, and knowledge about how to live and how to make sense of the world. As in literature, it is from within the chronotope that an individual might occasionally break through to a glimpse of the divine. We raise consciousness from within what might be understood as the chronotope of an individual life. The examples of the medieval monastery courtyard and the art of Richard Long, then, considered as chronotopes of the individual monk and the artist give us insight into these characters. But our interest as readers is as learners: *their* texts inform *our* texts. We are secondary readers, invited into the dramatic arc of the story. We could be the monk reading in the cloister for a lifetime, or Richard Long reading the surface of the earth. These chronotopes suggest how spatial systems—whether of architecture, landscape, or environment—may function as texts in a lifelong unfolding of consciousness. They illustrate not only the chronotopic action in the individual, but also the potential of architecture, landscape, and environmental design.

WALKING THE SQUARE: MONASTIC ENCLOSURE



(Corporeal deformity. Las Duenas. Salamanca, Spain)

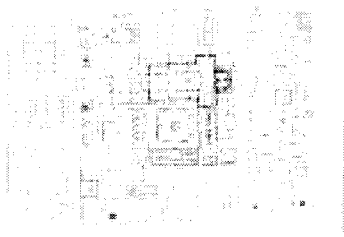
The monastic impulse is by nature about walking: walking or not walking, wandering or staying put. The cloister defines, from a range of possibilities, what it means to pursue an exclusively spiritual path, and this particular definition, in the case of the medieval monastery courtyard, had evolved over centuries. A monk (from the Greek *monos*, meaning alone), was at first by definition solitary, pulled away from worldly things and concerns. The precursor to the monk was simply the hermit who had withdrawn to the desert, alone with God and

temptation, prepared to do battle for the cultivation of his faith. Out of the solitary efforts of a great number of religious contemplatives in the earliest two or three hundred years of Christianity there arose a number of experiments in more organized and collective monasticism. These monastic models would eventually coalesce in Western monasticism, represented above all by Benedict of Nursia, the so called “father of Western monasticism.”⁶

The rule of Saint Benedict vivifies the activity of walking just as walking was part of the vivid experience of the cloister.⁷ The rule invited followers into the benefits of the rule by offering a way, a path into the life of Christ and communion with God. In the rule walking takes on a sense of urgency through the use of the verb to run (*currendum*). The word is used four times with great care, and its usage represents a spiritual recommendation. Just as the physical place of the cloister would represent and embody the fourfold Christian path, the four instances of the verb *currendum* constituted an argument for living by monastic rule. Run to the rule and the cloister, the prologue urges, “while you are still alive,” “by doing good deeds,” “do what will profit us forever,” and do this “on the path of God’s commandments.” Saint Benedict’s invitation to walk in the way of the rule, urgently and steadfastly, is followed immediately by a description of four kinds of monks and kinds of walking.

Saint Benedict holds up the *cenobitic* life, the monks life in common, as the most desired, or at least the most central to concern in the Rule. The cenobites are those belonging to a monastery, serving under a rule and an Abbott. Though neither scorned nor held up as most valued, the *anchorites* are those who have passed through the test of monastic life and who are now prepared for the life of the hermit. In contrast are *sarabaites* and *gyrovagues*, who follow their own will, or wander aimlessly. Though Saint Benedict is hardly concerned with the failures of the wanderers, it is plain that aimless walking is cured by submission to rule and foursquare monastic enclosure.

The medieval European monastery courtyard—the cloister—represented in physical form the intention of monastic rules. The archetype of the four covered passages around a square meant that *spiritus*, *anima*, and *corpus* were brought together in a single site of regular encounter. The cloister brought together the abbey church (*spiritus*), the chapter house and other rooms related to study (*anima*), and the refectory, dormitory, and warming room (*corpus*). The cloister was the heart, the central circulatory structure of the monastery. The monks had to move along or through it in their daily activities. Though the cloister connected all major components of the monastery by its covered walkways, it also protected the symbolic garden at its center, which was simultaneously a model of the physical world and of an Edenic paradise. The cloister was both of the earth and of the heavens, used for washing feet and for worship. Just as daily reading and meditation served to exercise and strengthen the imagination and intellect of the monk, the



The St. Gall Plan.

monk's daily physical comportment in the community of the cloistered space served to test and strengthen spiritual development.

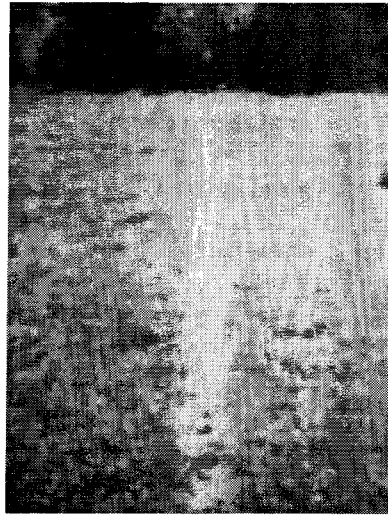
The cloister represents an architectural and landscape ideal through which is preserved the sanctity of walking. The surviving parchment plan of the abbey of Saint Gall, dating from the ninth century, represents the earliest detailed illustration of a cloister and monastery.⁸ The St Gall plan illustrates some of the objectives of the Rule of Saint Benedict. Steps separate and connect spaces significant to spiritual experience; spiral steps permit climbing to the heights to look down upon the body of the community in plan. At the center of the cloister the cross and the protecting juniper bear witness to the central purpose of the monastery. By walking and sitting, the monks would make spiritual progress through daily contact with each other and the material world.

Thomas Dale argues the sculptural carvings of the cloister were designed to serve the monk in his daily and lifelong spiritual meditation and struggle.⁹ The carvings are the most obvious part of the "text" of the cloister; they stand out from the cloister's implicit symbolic meaning, and form a persistent backdrop to the regular practice of written text. Dale argues that the carvings, often depicting corporeal deformities and phantasms, represented to the monk the very disfigurements of soul the monk had to shed and overcome. Corporeal deformity, broadly speaking, signified outward evidence of the "inner man"; to impose well ordered gait and bearing on the body was to bring spiritual order. Disorder showed itself in the carvings through the depiction of uncontrolled behavior such as laughter, licentious music, wild dancing, or monstrous appearance. The inclusion of hybrid beasts, hideous laughing faces, musicians and secular entertainers, naked dancers, temptresses, and devouring animals in the cloister all represent specific instances of corporeal deformity: these were visions to guard against as the monk pursued the embodiment of the sacred. Cloisters contained both sacred and monstrous imagery, sometimes one or the other exclusively, sometimes both together. The chronotope of the life of the monk contained sacred, profane, implicit and explicit texts, all interwoven over a very long period of time—presumably until the monk's death.

The ideal represented by the life of the monk in the cloister is still with us as a possible way of being. Self-discipline, upright

bearing, appearance, strength against temptation, success in the battle against evil, temperance, seriousness, and character: these monkish virtues serve as common benchmarks in contemporary life. We imagine ourselves as having to be cloistered in order to embody these virtues. A considerable amount of contemporary rhetoric, and political propaganda, is supported by this way of imagining virtue.

WALKING THE LINE: RICHARD LONG



(Richard Long. A Line Made by Walking. Bristol. 1967)

A millennium later, in the body of artist Richard Long, we find a radically different kind of monk, a wandering Zen poet, or a gyrovague. Long's sculpture, born of wandering, in contrast to sculpture of the walking around space of the monastery, appears to engage an entirely different world with an entirely different sensibility. Long has made hundreds of individual works, about and reliant on walking, since the early 1960s. *A Line Made by Walking*, Bristol, 1967, though not the first work indicative of his sensitivity and approach to materials, might be considered of a basic kind. Other outdoor works involve stones, water, snow, and sticks, but of equal status is the walk itself, and the documentation of it in text and pictures. In *Words After the Fact*, (1982), Long wrote of this commitment to homogeneity of representation and experience:

The freedom to use precisely all degrees of visibility and permanence is important in my work. Art can be a step or a stone. A sculpture, a map, a text, a photograph: all the forms of my work are equal and complementary. The knowledge of my actions, in whatever form, is the art. My art is the essence of my experience, not a representation of it.¹⁰

The freedom characteristic of Long's work is individual freedom, emblematic of the late twentieth century, in sharp

contrast to the communal imprisonment of the monastery. While at times the sculpture is symbolic, as the cloister and its details were symbolic, above all Long's sculptures possess the solemn aura of modernity, referring to ancient rites and places while remaining aloof. One cannot help but think of Benjamin's description of the evolution of works of art under industrial modernity in relation to Long's gallery sculptures.¹¹ In these pristine and sometimes cool works, Long harnesses the primitive to the abstract, and the abstract to the primitive, restoring the sense of the sacred under the bright lights of the contemporary corporate gallery.



(Richard Long, *Stick Circle*. Amsterdam, 1980)

Long is deeply committed, in his words and in the works of art he creates, to the idea of being modern, in contrast to being avant-garde. He has said he wanted to go into the landscape in order to be an artist in the landscape. He wanted to be able to re-think the idea of landscape art, not the tradition of landscape painting per se, but the idea of landscape as a commitment to place, use, and status. In his own words, in his own analysis in hindsight, there was nothing particularly avant-garde about what he was doing in the beginning; he wasn't trying to be avant-garde. He was just doing what seemed to make sense to him as a reasonable thing to do—at least that is how he describes it.¹²

Long started with a very basic question about what it would mean to be an artist going into the landscape, acting in the landscape as an artist. Influenced, as were many of his generation, by Dewey's description, Long sought to create works of art that might be experienced, in the viewer's own way, as a consequence of the original experience of the artist.¹³

Perhaps Long is by temperament simply trying to remain content with wherever he is. Perhaps he is always reducing or erasing the importance of his last act in order to preserve the continuity of his experience. There is a consistency extending from his earliest works to his last—a monomania punctuated by idiosyncrasy. What emerges when one looks at Long's body of work appears at first bewildering; he is content to make and remake. Long is always attuned to beauty but he never seems to change, evolve, or advance in any recognizable way. To look at a work by Long from 30 years ago, or from 5 years ago is to instantly recognize something deeply human but also to recognize that the piece is not the important thing; of far

A FIVE DAY WALK

FIRST DAY TEN MILES
SECOND DAY TWENTY MILES
THIRD DAY THIRTY MILES
FOURTH DAY FORTY MILES
FIFTH DAY FIFTY MILES

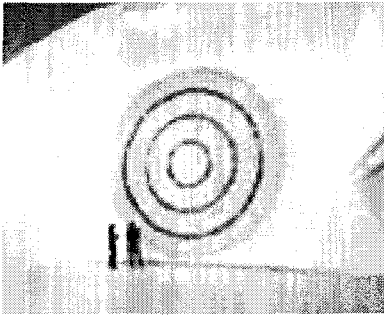
TOTNES TO BRISTOL BY ROADS AND LANES ENGLAND 1980

(Richard Long, *Text Work*)

greater importance and resonance is the life of the artist Richard Long. Long is an artist who has made his life the work of art, perhaps not by trying to show us that directly, but by showing us his interaction with the earth. Long's life is a chronotope characterized by constant walking over and artistic engagement with the surface of the earth.

Long's relationship to earth is first and foremost a relationship to self—he is interested in walking because he likes it, he enjoys being in the places that he walks, and walking the earth made sense to him from his earliest childhood. But Long's work also must inevitably raise for many questions about environment, nature, and wildness. Long takes us to the edge of bewilderment by responding with ideas about order in the places he encounters. Taken together with the personal nature of the artists work, one can consider the possibility that the bewilderment Long exposes us to is internal bewilderment—he shows us our need to order the landscape through his orderings, always beautiful, aesthetically satisfying, grand, masterly, primitive, and ringing with aura in the galleries and coffee table books in which the works are sold. Long does not seem to be commenting in any way upon this gallery/publishing/capitalist system. His engagement with it is without a trace of irony. His commitments are to a pristine, modern beauty, and to his experience as an artist. Long wants us to understand there need be nothing more for him. In the work we see the landscape and the work of art and the artist as no longer separate; they are joined in the chronotope of the lifelong journey—Long's continuous walk. Environmentalism, romanticism, abstraction, and symbol collapse together into a spiritual discipline repudiating the alienating forces of modernity and the present global situation.

The ideal represented by the life of the wandering artist is with us as a life option. Commitment, passion, focus, a sense of innate spirit, humor, and spontaneity; these artistic prerogatives serve as benchmarks in contemporary life. We imagine ourselves free. If the cloister is the archetypal space at the heart of the virtues of discipline, then open landscape, whether of



(Richard Long, *Puget Sound Mud Circle*, 1997)

wilderness or suburb is the archetypal space at the heart of the enjoyment of freedom. Long offers us through open text a cloister on the body of the earth. This cloister includes physical place, photographs, maps, artifacts, and words. We can imagine Long experiencing Benjamin's aura in the "natural objects" of the walk's original sites (because we know this truth from our own experience). But more importantly, just as Benjamin hoped-nostalgically and mystically – "aura," that gentle breeze of presence and absence, proximity and distance, never really went away with mechanically produced works of art. This "particular form of human experience"¹⁴ appears – even in reading the photographs, maps, artifacts, and words of Richard Long.

OPEN TEXT, ARCHITECTURE, AND THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE

Walking is essential to the experience of both the medieval cloister and Long's art. One might say that just as it is necessary to sit down to read a book, it is necessary to walk around to read the cloister sculpture or the surfaces of the earth. Beyond having walking in common, what essential qualities of these two examples are worth considering in architecture, landscape, and the design of the environment? What attributes of the text enhance the potential for the evolution of human consciousness? If we care at all about the evolution of human consciousness, can we support this evolution with intention through design?

The idea of the cloister is basic to architecture. The cloister is both a *prototype for outdoor space enclosed on four sides by open and glazed arcades*, and an archetype of sacred space in the midst of the profane. The architect has long imagined that to create the resemblance of the cloister, or the quiet courtyard, was to pour into a place the silence of sacred architecture. This sense of the sacred silence, the architect imagined, was conferred on the work, almost regardless of its other qualities, by the archetypal power of the cloister alone. Airports, shopping malls and shopping centers of every description, universities, community colleges, and other civic buildings, museums and

galleries, bookstores, restaurants, hospitals, and dozens of other building types and uses have all been designed, with varying degrees of success, to tap into the archetypal power of the silent sacred courtyard. The cloister as archetype and prototype persistently declares the importance of sacredness, spirituality, and the value of the evolution of human consciousness.

The idea of Long's orderings of nature also evokes our highest human aspirations, even though the work's architectural possibilities are not as definitive as the cloister type. As archetypes, Long's works reinforce a modern faith in abstraction and a sensitivity to inherent material qualities. As prototypes, Long's careful and gentle geometric inscriptions and arrangements suggest ways the architectural object can harmonize with nature while taming nature to our use. Long's work, taken together with the collective output of the so-called "earth artists," has influenced the field of landscape architecture in obvious and subtle ways.

One fundamental difference between the medieval and modern experience is the sense of certainty about how the world works. In the medieval model of the universe, though there were terrors to be avoided, there was faith in divine perfection. The medieval monk could be said to live a closed existence. The alienation of modernity, on the other hand, stems in part from a loss of such closed and restricting faith. In contrast, and perhaps as consolation, the modern mind is possessed of a relative freedom. In any case, this alienation and freedom is unavoidable. Common to both the cloister and to Long, besides walking, is some sense of the relation between the earth and the heavens, the sacred and the profane, cosmic consciousness and material consciousness.

When we walk in the landscapes of consumer capitalism we might – or may, or must – worship the sacred and struggle with the profane. In the shopping mall the walls are illuminated with our spiritual ambivalence. The common complaint from design-minded people, the complaint that turns the attention of thinking designers away from such places, is that consumer capitalist architectures and landscapes are utterly closed, spectacular, solipsistic, and mindless. But just as in the medieval courtyard, or in Long's art, walking around, even in landscapes of consumption, provides some opportunity for reading. That the text is chaotic has been under discussion for at least a century. Benjamin expressed particular concern for the "distraction" of the masses. But by now it should be clear that auratic experience is reciprocal experience. Benjamin's fears – and our present dark times – notwithstanding, we must proceed from the knowledge that human consciousness advances regardless of the state of the material world and aura is not a given property of the real.

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