

In the Ecotone
The UC Santa Cruz Campus
Part 1



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An ecotone is a transition area between ecologies, where life-worlds meet and integrate.

The word combines *eco* and *tone* (from the Greek *tonos* or tension).

A place where ecologies are in tension.

The University of California, Santa Cruz, built in a redwood forest overlooking Monterey Bay, defies description. The images and words gathered here attempt to render at least some of the qualities that make the place extraordinary. Photographs, all taken between 2001 and 2015, are accompanied by three linked essays. The first searches for a historical ecology and an aesthetics that can do justice to the site's complexity. The second pays tribute to the landscape architect, Thomas Church, who decisively influenced the shaping of the campus. The third traces UCSC's experiment with environmental design through changing times and ponders its continued significance.

The project owes a great deal to my association with four colleagues, Frank Zwart, Virginia Jansen, Shelby Graham, and Michael Cowan. Together we curated "An Uncommon Place: Shaping the UC Santa Cruz Campus" at the Porter Sesnon Gallery, April 8th to May 9th, 2015. The exhibition was accompanied by "Rhythms of Place: Photographic Explorations of the UC Santa Cruz Campus," on which I collaborated with Richard Wohlfeiler and Iene Reti.

An online record of "An Uncommon Place" can be found at:

<http://library.ucsc.edu/news/new-an-uncommon-place-a-digital-companion>

Many quotations in the text are drawn from the invaluable oral history collection at UCSC's McHenry Library. < <http://library.ucsc.edu/regional-history-project> >



A Poetics of Space

In published photographs of the UC Santa Cruz campus the sun is always shining. Yet rain and fog make everything especially seductive. Multiple hues in the redwood bark emerge; textures of the cement walls deepen; mosses and lichens come alive. Rain saturates the colors. Fog brings out the voids, the negative spaces in the landscape. I learned this from digital photography, which I took up around 2000. Taking pictures made me stop and look. And beyond simply looking, the images I collected helped me feel the shifts of mood, the rhythms of the site. This essay evokes what I've been discovering: a way to think about UCSC as an ecotone, a place of encounters and transitions.

When I came here in 1978 I found the campus breathtaking and a bit unreal. It seemed like an academic Garden of Eden, beautiful in ways that strained the normal language of aesthetics. The place was inspiring, but also challenging. A university scattered across such uneven terrain could be confusing—and isolating. To get to an event in Cowell College from Oakes, where my office was located, meant a roundabout drive or a twenty-minute uphill hike. Too often I didn't make the effort. Others will recognize the situation: at UC Santa Cruz, the East and West sides of campus can feel like separate worlds.

Yet when I did find time to walk through the forest, I didn't regret it. Surprising vistas greeted me at every turn. After I began carrying a camera, I discovered that the changing seasons and times of day brought dramatic modifications of lighting and texture. The meadows and the view across Monterey Bay were transformed by shifting cloud formations. The footbridges, floating in the midst of redwoods, bays and madrones, offered vertiginous perspectives, both up and down. The university buildings revealed themselves piecemeal. Impossible to photograph whole, they often seemed to be invaded by the trees. Tracking new angles of vision I followed paths along the bottoms of ravines and out into the fields. I came across ruined lime kilns, tree forts woven inside redwood circles, and curious artworks made of wood or stone. I surprised, and was surprised by, deer, bobcats, snakes, squirrels, hawks...

I began to realize how variegated the place is and how many different creatures make use of it. UCSC is a crowded ecology (eco, from *oikos* or house), a dwelling place for rarely-sighted banana slugs and teams of scientists working in labs, hummingbirds at the arboretum and students in lecture halls, organic farmers and philosophers, bus drivers and librarians. A complex, changing place.

People often describe the campus as a pristine, natural environment (especially when they are resisting a new construction project). In the early 1960s, UCSC's planners invoked the language of "wilderness" even as they projected a university that would grow to 27,000 students, twenty colleges, and various professional schools. They began their proposal to the UC Regents with an excerpt from Frederick Law Olmsted's "Yosemite Report" of 1865, a passionate argument for minimal disruption of the natural scenery.

One particularly thoughtful proponent of this general view was Ansel Adams whose elegant black and white photographs illustrated the future university's Long Range Development Plan (LRDP). In 1962 Adams jotted down his "Thoughts on the U C Santa Cruz Campus," a widely circulated document that formed the basis for his inaugural Charter Address three years later.

It is true that this area is not a true wilderness. However, it has some wilderness aspects which have re-asserted themselves... What we see today is a landscape which is, in a sense, recovering from some severe use – but which might easily suffer a final relapse! It has the great charm of rural integrity (western style.) It echoes past exploitations – quarries, logging, pasturage – but the scars are being gently and miraculously softened. Instead of the great single boles of the primeval redwoods, we have the "fairy rings" of the younger trees – a growth perhaps unique in nature but common as a scar-tissue phenomenon of lumbering. Under the trees, in hilly glades and steep gullies the original cover is growing afresh. The oaks are dying with inevitable Homeric intensity but growing new again with the confidence we attribute to non-human inevitability.

For Adams, a kind of second nature was growing back, healing the wounds of human intervention. If carefully protected, the place could be a refuge from technocratic society, offering "a special condition of beauty and—if you will—of spiritual therapy." His touchstones were John Muir's Yosemite and the ancient Greeks who, he noted, taught philosophy under the trees. But he knew there could be no simple return to an original wilderness or pre-industrial wisdom.

Even before the logging, the ranching, and the industrial lime production Adams mentions, Ohlone Indians set fires to clear the underbrush and fertilize the oak

communities on which they depended for winter food. UCSC is the latest episode in a deep history of environmental interactions involving diverse populations, local and invasive. Nature here is anything but pure. (Research by Professors Ingrid Parker, Gregory Gilbert and their students has shown that of forty- four plant species now growing in the meadows thirty-seven are introduced, mostly European in origin.) The complex history of the site is best evoked by a new ecological vocabulary I learned at UCSC from colleagues like Donna Haraway. In an oral history interview she observes:

UCSC is more like a species assemblage... I think universities are like edge areas in ecology where different habitat assemblages intermix, like ecotones, where all of the species are in a sense outside their comfort zone...They are outside of their normative comfort zone, but they can still make a living well enough to be there. But new things are happening in these ecotones.

New things are happening, not well understood through simplified stories of nature replaced by civilization, or an ecosystem growing back. The university belongs to an unfinished history of interactions and transformations. UCSC doesn't just occupy an ecotone, the transition zone between forest and grassland. It *is* an ecotone: a particular dynamic combination of life-ways, animal and vegetal. Its composite environment is always being assembled and dis-assembled with friction and difficulty. The term ecotone combines eco and tone (from *tonos* or tension). Ecologies in tension: struggle, invasion, survival, overlap, dependency. *A modus vivendi.*

Learning to think this way about environmental transitions and tensions has helped me glimpse a deeper aesthetics. Aesthetics, in a return to the word's older meanings, signifies

embodied, sensuous perception. On the UC Santa Cruz campus you never walk, or see, very far in a straight line. There's little that's smooth or continuous. Something is always veiled, emerging—a vista around the next bend, a building behind tall trees. The focus is constantly changing.

You're inside the forest. Then a curtain parts and you're on top of a high hill. A vast panorama stretches below. When the weather's clear the view extends all the way to the mountains of Big Sur. When clouds fill Monterey Bay, you feel like an aviator. Turning from the Bay and plunging back in the trees, perhaps you linger on a footbridge or explore a dappled chamber made by live oak branches. Walking around the campus, the alternation recurs: deep inside and high above, close up and distant, in and out of the light.

When I arrived here, I had never known anything like the Santa Cruz campus. My ideas of nature and landscape were shaped by New England. Like many first arrivals, I frequently got lost. But somehow the place felt familiar. Little by little I recognized the abrupt shifts of scale and mood I knew from dreams. Gaston Bachelard's great book, *The Poetics of Space*, offered a guide to this half-conscious world. In a kind of poetic psychoanalysis, Bachelard explores the emotional landscape formed by a childhood house. A French house, to be sure: its particular verticality from cellar to garret, its insides and outsides, nooks and secret places. But this "topoanalysis," as he called it, helped me feel at home on the Santa Cruz campus—by means of an improbable detour.

The sense of being both deep in a redwood forest and high on a hilltop over Monterey Bay was an experience I already knew from having grown up in a New York City apartment. That first home was also a place that combined enclosure and altitude. We lived on the sixth floor. To get there you had to penetrate a series of doors and locks, traveling down long hallways and in a small elevator. The apartment seemed deep within. Yet once inside, the feeling could abruptly change. If you looked out, or when, in summertime, the windows were thrown open (careful, stand back!), you found yourself high up. A city stretching below...

We carry with us spatial habits and emotional maps. Becoming aware of mine helped me recognize dreamlike alternations that give shape and movement to the UCSC campus: high up/deep inside, vertical/horizontal, light/shadow, distant/close, tangled/open, veiled/emerging. Elements of an embodied aesthetic response that, of course, varies from person to person.

UCSC isn't always a comfortable place. It can be disorienting, and eerily quiet. In the city I knew as a child there was always noise--something happening—a sense of other people nearby. On campus the trees and topography muffle sounds and intensify feelings of isolation. At night, women walking alone can feel afraid, and not just women. Elba Rosario Sanchez, former Director of the Spanish for Spanish Speakers Program, recalls in an oral history interview:

Most of my students...were from LA, urban kids, kids from barrios where they had helicopters flying overhead at all kinds of hours of the day and night. They would tell me, "I can't sleep at night. It's too quiet. I need to hear the traffic. I need to hear the helicopters. I need to hear the sirens..." This campus was such a foreign place to them.

Drew Goodman, an early UCSC student, listens differently: "What drew me to UCSC? The environment. You have the forest there and the farm and the ocean. You would really have to not be paying attention not to hear nature calling out so loudly there."

The oral history archive at McHenry Library records many responses to the place, none indifferent. Karl Pister, UCSC's sixth chancellor, recalls his first impression, arriving from Berkeley and asking "Where is the campus?" No center, no campanile, no recognizable form. Even people who have spent many years here can feel lost. There is no point of overview, no place above the forest from which to take your bearings. Uphill is usually North, but not always. The meandering border of the meadow faces several directions, from Southeast to West. Campus maps are little help. The road system, largely unchanged since the early years, is essentially a single loop. Viewed from a car, most of the campus is hidden behind foliage. Driving a roundabout route from place to place gives a distorted sense of the distances separating colleges, science labs, the library and administration buildings.

Following the footpaths, you rely on point-to-point orientation, always in the midst of things--winding, climbing, descending, finding the way. Ezra Pound called this form of travel a *periplum*—land seen from the edge, never from above, never with control. A poetics of juxtapositions. Without a map, you attend to what's nearby, the particular, the unexpected. Your perspective always changing...

As we will see in Part Two, the campus was conceived in this spirit. UC Santa Cruz took shape, less from an architect's drawing board than from walking on a site without roads, a rugged, densely forested terrain. Planning from the ground up.













































