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Helena van Vliet, LLC

Restorative Biophilic Design

October, 2014

Earth Calling Sky: This Place Could be Sacred

The place: **The Salk Institute for Biological Studies**, La Jolla, CA

The event: **2014 ANFA Conference (Academy for Neuroscience in Architecture)**

The date: **Autumnal Equinox 2014**

Akin to an Egyptian temple, the Salk receives us in processional sequence, arms wide open. It pulls us in, forward and up towards an anticipated vantage point. Symmetry directs. Gateway becomes overlook. A grove of orange trees casts sweet scent of citrus. Water. The sound of water. Central water channel directing the eye, down, through and beyond - rain water meeting sea water- into the ocean and up to the sky.

Dr. Jonas Salk envisioned "a welcoming and inspiring environment for biological research," and "unobstructed laboratory interiors set in a dramatic location that inspires creativity among its researchers." A place for contemplation. The result is a space which has all the characteristics of a cathedral, its roof the ever-changing sky itself.

Above photo: Helena van Vliet project.

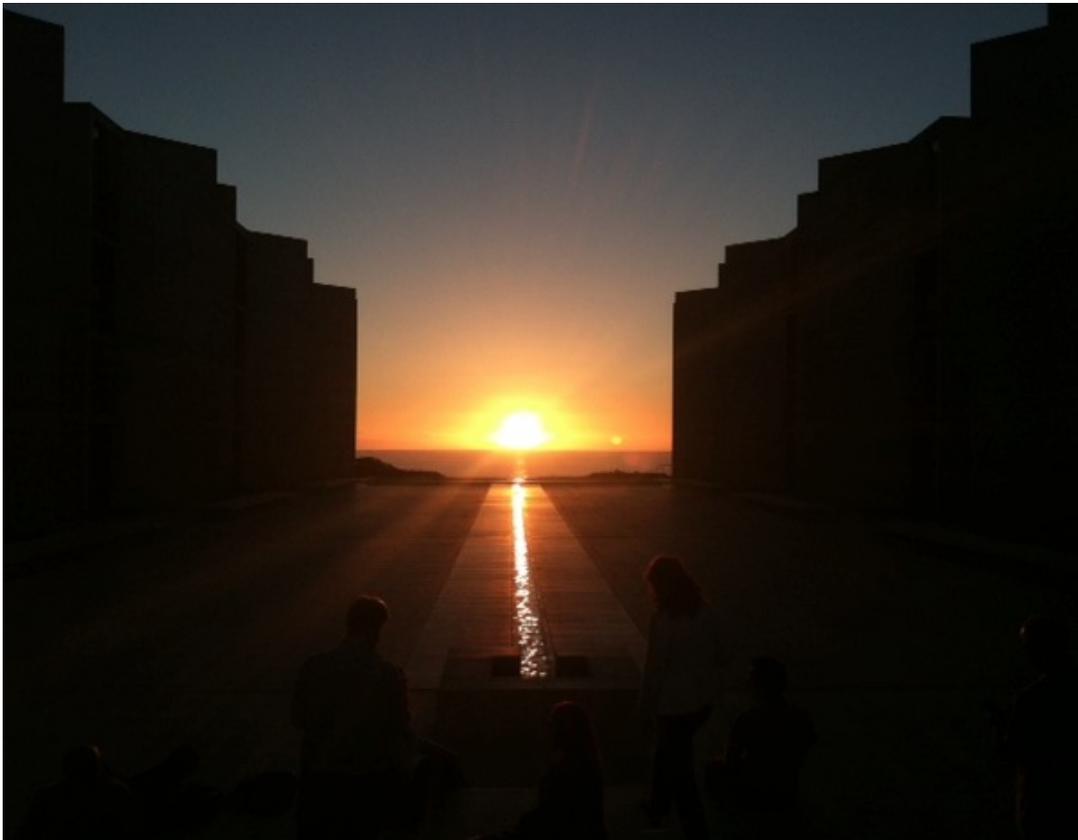


Helena van Vliet photo. Salk Institute. Louis I. Kahn, 1965.

A Cosmic Phenomenon

The conference date was chosen for a reason. Once a year—on this day only - the water channel in the central open space aligns with the setting sun, with the autumnal equinox. On this one day, this civic space and with it the entire building complex, aligns itself with a cosmic phenomenon. For a long moment, the sun seemed to pause in its descent. Water became fire. A direct linear connection between humanity and cosmos seemed probable, indeed visible.

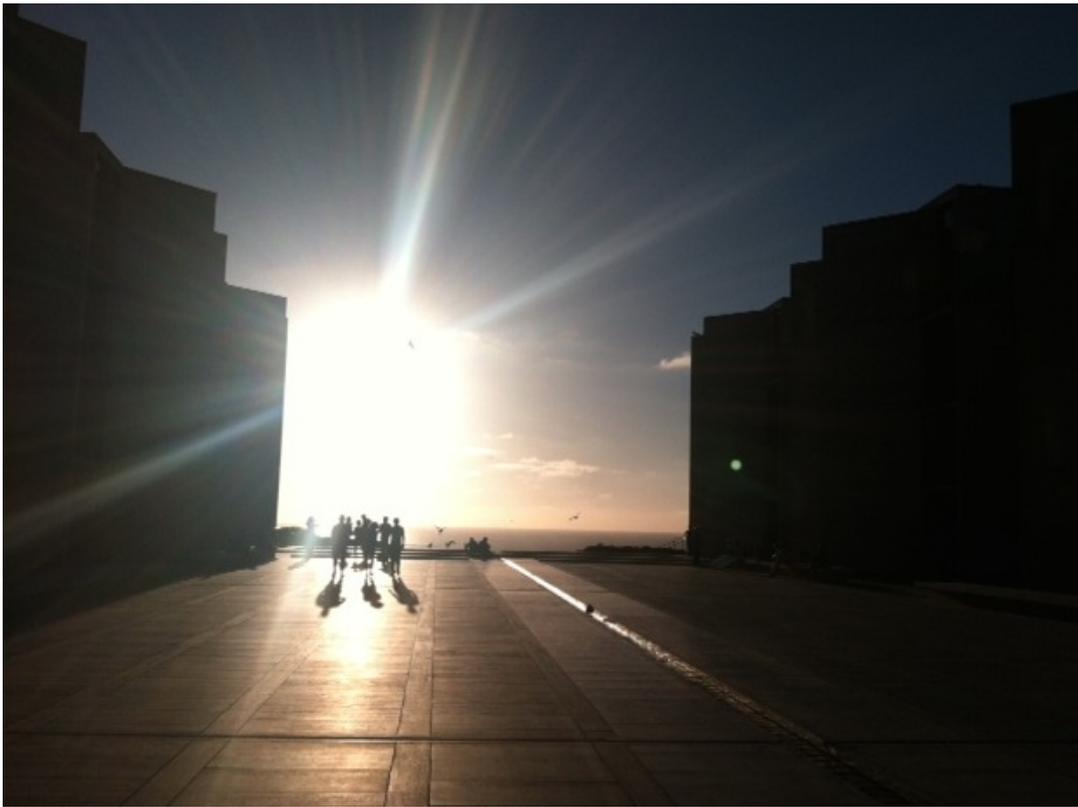
Something about this alignment, its rarity as well as its predictable return, represents archetypal connection for us all. Moves us deeply. Moves us to awed silence. Hundreds travel from afar to partake in this experience every year. It is as grounding as it is up-lifting. As humbling as it is exhilarating.



Helena van Vliet photo. Salk Institute.

Enso (Ensou)

In Zen Buddhism Enso represents the concept of void filled with infinite potential. It struck me that the Salk courtyard is such a space, a void that connects everything, the silence between the notes. The concept of Enso represents void as wholeness and completion: "form is void and void is form."



Helena van Vliet photo. Salk Institute.

Building as Means for Transformative Experience

One of the many areas of scientific research at Salk Institute involves 'deciphering biological systems,' understanding the fundamental working principles of life. Another area is 'decoding the brain,' studying how neural circuits are connected and intertwined.

The communal awed silence in the Salk courtyard at the time of the equinox alignment united architects and neuroscientists in the shared quest of this very conference: to comprehend more fully, how we as a species (our brains programmed through evolutionary selection) experience spaces, which emotions are evoked by which spatial alignments, proportions, sequences, patterns, colors and forms.

Biophilic Design Principles

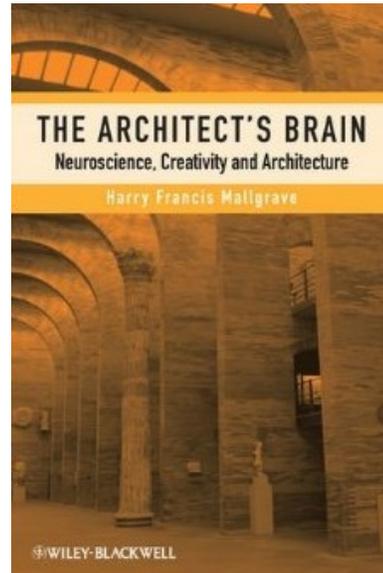
The Principles of Biophilic Design have much to offer in this conversation. Strongly rooted in evolutionary-survival-based preferences, neuroscience and architecture are currently working towards a shared middle. The middle being a clearer understanding of what, neurologically, physiologically as well as psychologically constitutes healthy human habitat. A human habitat, which sustainably integrates with while depending upon the fundamental working principles of life.

Recommended Reading

[The Architect's Brain: Neuroscience, Creativity, and Architecture](#)

From the book:

This is the first book to consider the relationship between the neurosciences and architecture, offering a compelling and provocative study in the field of architectural theory.



Nature in the News

[Biophilic architecture: building better buildings for happier inhabitants.](#) *A recent study from a University of Queensland's School of Psychology professor concludes that an office enriched with plants makes staff happier and boosts productivity by 15 per cent.*



[Art Entangled in Nature.](#)

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