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Creating Space
The Nasher Sculpture Center and the Psychotherapeutic Task

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But the image has touched the depth before it stirs the surface

--- The Poetics of Space [1]

If beauty is the splendor of the true, as Plato tells us, then a new space for the true has been created in the center of our city. A space for the soul has opened up. What image comes to mind when you think of the soul of the city? I am tempted to tell you to stop reading at this point and go experience the Nasher Sculpture Center. Immerse yourself in its garden and permit its image to touch your depths before it stirs the surface. The center itself is a beautiful sculpture created from an exceedingly ugly parking lot that once scarred a block-long stretch next to the Dallas Museum of Art. With apologies to Joni Mitchell, "they've created paradise and ruined a parking lot." From within the garden at the Nasher, one looks out at the city as from the womb, about to be born, to engage all the life the city has to offer. It is truly one of the most beautiful places from which to view Dallas.

What does this new creation have to do with our task as psychotherapists? Step into the garden, walk down the gentle grade toward the north. As you move away from the building you will gradually descend into a garden surrounded by icons of twentieth century sculpture and a wonderful gleaming space created by the Dallas skyline. Renzo Piano [2], the architect, tells us

he wanted to “steal this piece of land from its normal destiny.” He “amiably regards the site as being in the ‘mess’ of the city.” The garden is slightly excavated to be below street level, “imbuing the site with an archaeological ambience.” Parallel travertine walls run north and south for a block and set the garden off from the rest of the city. The Tuscan-quarried stone has been treated “to reveal what Piano calls the stone’s ‘vibrating’ texture.” He sees the walls as “preexisting, as though they were remnants of an ancient building or temple, a noble ruin extant in the middle of the busy downtown. This allusion [illusion] to the past reinforces the Nasher as a special site, distinct from the surrounding shiny newness of the Dallas urban environment. Piano imagined the garden, not as a paradise on Earth, but as a place enriched by the turmoil of the city. It, in turn, would reinvigorate the city.”

Psychotherapy for Winnicott provides the space in which to find and create again the self-experience that we have lost.[3] It is our task to help create a space with patients within which they can discover something for themselves. Winnicott warns that, “Interpretation outside the ripeness of the material is indoctrination and produces compliance.” Renzo Piano has a similar caution about “style”. He says, “…style signifies both a narcissistic attitude and a dangerous concept, because you end up imposing your stamp before you understand what is the reality of the place.” Over a number of years Raymond Nasher with Renzo Piano and Peter Walker, the landscape architect, patiently played with a number of different designs before they arrived at the present configuration. Their imaginative thought processes were placed in a dialectical tension with the reality of the space, creating a fit, much as we do when we create an interpretation together with our patients. They have created a space that imaginatively engages the lost parts of ourselves.

How do we create this space in the therapy hour? Winnicott

explains “Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist.”[4] We must be able to create a potential space in which to play. Therapy requires two people able to use this potential space. Ogden[5] describes a common scene that illustrates the creation of a potential space: A frightened two-and-a-half year-old tenses up and clings to his mother resisting his bath. She spies some tiny cups and saucers among the bath toys and says, “I would like some tea.” He shifts from his tense insistent pleas of, “My not like bath,” to a narrative of his play, “Tea not too hot. My blow on it for you.” His mother has some tea and the illusion created by their play provides a space in which his bath can now occur.

As we descend into the archeological past with our patients, we help them to play, we create a potential space, placing their past in a dialectical tension with the present, we create a play space where only fear and ugliness existed before. We don’t leave the reality of their lives, but we create a space that reinvigorates them within the mess of their city.

So visit the Nasher, enjoy its beauty, allow it to reinvigorate you as you reflect on the interplay of the spaces between mother and infant, therapist and patient, lover and beloved, citizens and their culture, and the human community and the transcendent.[6] Go expecting an experience of poesy[7], a process in which something is called into existence, which was not there before. You won’t be disappointed.

Endnotes

[1] Gaston Bachelard, (1964).

[2] All quotations concerning the conception of the Nasher Sculpture Center are from a superb piece by Mark Thistlethwaite entitled “The Art of Designing the Nasher Sculpture Center” in the catalogue published on the occasion of the Center’s opening: *Nasher*

Sculpture Center Handbook, Edited by Steven A. Nash, the Center's director, 2003.

[3] Winicott in *Playing and Reality,* (1971), p. 51. and Ulanov in *Finding Space* (2001), p.125.

[4] *Playing and Reality*, p. 38.

[5] Ogden, (1990). On Potential Space.

[6] Ulanov, p.147.

[7] Poesy is a seldom-used word that refers to the inspiration involved in composing poetry. Its more archaic form is *poiesis*, which comes from the Greek meaning to create. We get *poem* and pharmaco*poeia* from the same root. Murray Cox applies the idea of poesy to the art of doing psychotherapy. It is our job as therapists to create with the patient a potential space where we can call into existence something that was not there before. This creative act resonates with the creation story in Genesis. The Earth is described as "tohu va bohu", "without form and void", sometimes translated as chaos. When therapy works well, the chaos our patient brings is poetically transformed into a bountiful new creation. Murray Cox and Alice Theilgaard in *Mutative metaphors in psychotherapy*. London: Tavistock (1987).

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