Synopsis: An architect travels to Gandhi’s last ashram in the verdant plains of central India and reflects on what Gandhi’s hut and the community around it have to say about how to build contemporary ecological buildings and cities. The author alternates observations of the place with the rush of thoughts it engenders, weaving ideas of self-reliance, radical democracy, an extended definition of self-in-community, the flex-flow of life patterns fit to nature’s place patterns, the oneness-yet-hierarchy of culture and nature, the nonessentialness of convenience, and the need for an integral development reconnecting building-culture with both nature and an ethical life.

It was a tough choice between inhaling sub-continental dust with the windows down and sharing the exotic odors, windows up, of the five people touching all sides of me. The share-taxi, really a Land Cruiser-sized Jeep, from Ellora to Aurangabad was 15 rupees each, about 30 cents. What a deal, I thought, until one by one, the shared seating was filled to the overflowing occupancy of 24. The Jeep blared Hindi music, and no modesty remained among the passengers. Thirty kilometers later, I bought a ticket for the luxury bus to Jalgaon which included a free Hindi movie and one person per cushioned seat. At the hotel, hot water arrived in buckets. The next morning’s train arrived at Wardha by 11am, where I caught a yellow auto-rickshaw, the last in a medley of a half-dozen transportation modes on my trek to Sevagram, Gandhi’s last ashram.

Twelve to fifteen permanent residents still live at Sevagram, with numerous visitors, long and short term. They practice simple agricultural lives and ascetic principles. 2pm: On tiny portable spinning wheels, thread from cotton the community grows is spun
for at least 20 minutes, the time required to spin thread for one year’s cloth. 5pm: A simple, locally grown, delicious vegetarian meal is eaten while sitting on the floor, mostly in silence. Fresh, warm milk is served with jaggery, a raw cane sugar. Yellow rice, mild dal (lentil stew), and all the chapatis you can eat complete the meal. 6pm: During prayer, men and women are separated, as at dinner, and seated on the gravel courtyard, chanting while accompanied by a single one-string instrument. They meditate, the sound of collective silence.

The peace and simplicity of the place are profound. It was quiet. Their work, digging in the fields, spinning, cooking dinner, is their meditation. Their values are kindness and truthfulness. The buildings are simple mud huts with dung or stone floors and hand-made, clay-tiled roofs, all from local materials constructed by local village craftspeople—made by hands of humans, not the shaping of machines. I wondered about how such a simple way of building became an expression of ahimsa, non-violence. At its base, it is a kind of radical democracy, where one’s desires do not expand with one’s means, where what is taken from the earth is close to what one truly needs, and where fulfillment does not consume the resources required by another. It is also a place of humility, of a physical expression of the spiritual equanimity among persons, of non-hierarchical relationships in a culture of caste, class, and bureaucracy.

Sevagram reminds me of what Gregory Bateson said about the basic unit of survival not being the organism, but rather, organism-in-environment. So close are we and it that we can not take a single breath, drink a cup of water, sleep one night under a roof, or eat a single bite of food that was not purified and provided by nature’s ecological processes. At Sevagram, this is easy to see, but it is much harder at home, where natural process is covert. Perhaps we cannot say that nature is something to be connected with or to. We cannot talk meaningfully about reducing human impacts on an external nature. You and I and they and our environment are one living system. The connection with or dissociation from nature is in our perception. Does our connection to nature consist of removing our perceptual blocks?

Gandhi’s house, Bapu Kuti, as the residents call it, is a small house with a small entry porch, a sitting room with woven floor mats for a few people, a small work space for Gandhi, a guest room, a place to care for the sick, an open verandah, and a not-so-Indian-style bathroom with a custom-built sit-down toilet – altogether perhaps 450 square feet. Such a small place contains such large lessons, even for me today. I left architectural practice because I was weary of working on houses in which neither I nor
anyone in my family could ever afford to live. I took up research and teaching to influence more people and more buildings to evolve toward ecological integrity. This small home, the joy of the people here, and the modest life of the millions I have seen on the journey here force me to reconsider what I am doing and whether I am asking the right questions.

In a place so raw, so far down on the consumer food chain, it is clear that human community, even the city itself, is existentially, fundamentally dependent on nature, a nature which is “right here,” inside, as much as it is ever “out there.” If we destroy the physical landscape, then life will die. However, if we destroy all biological things, the material landscape will survive. Life will return to dust. Similarly, without the living landscape, there can be no cultural city. The mind is alive, but all that is alive is not mind. Biological life survives without human culture, but not vice versa.

_Bapu Kuti_ makes one keenly aware of how little one actually needs to live a dignified life. This, in turn, leads to another, more powerful question. Is it not perverse to see industrialized technology as the progressive development for human habitat? Is my softer, eco-path version of technology much better? I suspect that I, and the whole organic-tech green movement, am off-course by several orders of magnitude. Certainly mere resource efficiency and human comfort are not measures worthy of constructing a new model of building. The spareness of Gandhi’s home amplifies simple rituals, the circular events of community and companionship. These people live well. They have friends, books, intellectual lives, enough to eat, and human connections and care of the kind rarely seen. But they have no real material wealth.

Back home, there is the natural environment and the built environment, and these incredibly separate things set up all kinds of thorny dualisms. We think ourselves into conceptual corners with these modern differentiations, often rising to pathological dissociations of self, culture, and nature. Yet here, the land is alive; it is a complex of forces which flows from bedrock to buildings to birds above. These are the forces that keep life going, the ecological services that conservation biologists tout but city dwellers never experience. I can also see the land here as a place that nurtures minds and souls, where nature restores us, where our relationship with the environment is participatory, where we develop in the environment. People here have shifted their perception; they know the land as an extension of their lives. How might we not only see the land as the place we inhabit, but also as a place that helps to define who we are, a place from which we cannot be separated?
The lesson of Gandhi’s house is also about the non-essentialness of convenience, about the non-separateness of living and working, and ultimately, of self and other. From my modernist training in design school, I imbibed the view that embellishment evidences quality in buildings. I still carry the embedded cultural story that comfort equals luxury and that quality of life improves with size. Yet, here I see virtue and beauty in a humane minimalism, the kind of inconvenience that filters out the irrelevant and allows the perennial qualities in us to surface. It is evident here that there is a different phylum of time. Though there are clocks and watches, there are also bells and chimes, sunrise and sunset, summer and winter, field work and returning from the field, cooking and being cooked for, caring and being cared for, exposure to the elements and protection from them.

The contrast is immense between my home–with its isolation from the rhythms of place–and the pervasive connections to sky, sun, shade, and breeze found here. Here, the machine does not conquer the midday heat, so there is rest and time for reflection. Here, there is not the uniform space of home, where every square foot has light, heat, and cool whenever we desire. Fine work moves toward light. Spaces shift from sleep to work to social activity, while the activities migrate to follow shade or breeze from deep retreats to perimeter exposure and back. No single uses occur in specific places, our concrete placement in the rational matrix. Though there is electricity, it does not make bright the night. In the darkness there is time for talking with other souls and for mysteries of deep skies. There is time for rest–and quiet.

This non-separateness, an integral non-duality with nature, was made clear to me when I saw a communal water pump in the garden between a loose cluster of buildings. From the hand pump, a simple and elegant overflow channel guided wastewater along the ground to a trench, encircling mulch at the base of a single shade tree. Every time the pump was used, the tree was watered. The visibility of the linkage brought the lesson of the relationship to mind. In the heat of the day, the tree returned the favor as it cooled the ground for an afternoon of napping, reading, or contemplation. I imagined a city like this, where every form arose as a manifestation of our relationships to processes that we co-create with nature.

It’s hard to describe what a place like this does to a person. It must be felt; it’s like being immersed in a vibrant world where wholeness and integration, the profound sense of aliveness, are so palpable that one can no longer go on in the normal sleep-walking state. No one can say this of contemporary American neighborhoods, which are neither
beautiful, nor do they feed our souls. Neighborhoods today are not great communities with a shared civic life. Neighborhoods today are not in sync with ecological processes. Anyone who looks carefully sees this is true. In each of these ways, the life in neighborhoods is diminished and each of us is also diminished. Each of us has to struggle harder to live, to find joy, to freely express our inner self. We are more fragmented, more disconnected from our self, from our society, and from our environment.

Healing the pathology of this dis–integration is a design problem. This dissociation of individuals from social groups, of rational engineering from its ecological context, of self-development from civic purpose, of micro-systems from their macro-containers–this is, in part, a design problem about the order of our cities. The challenge of twenty-first century neighborhood design is the challenge of integration. An integral neighborhood would reconnect art, culture and nature, the self, the social system, and the physical environment, weaving the usually independent approaches of aesthetic formalism, social engagement, and environmentalism.

On the second class train car, heading south, small, hand-pinched terracotta cups and used banana leaf plates sail a meters-short flight from barred window to field on their return to become, in a year or so, flowers once again. Sevagram and its microcosm Bapu Kuti weave an indescribable simple/complex, organic, living network of person-community-place. “Chai. Coffee. Nescafe´,” a barefoot boy chants. When was the last time I heard spoken in my civilized progressive design school the words, beauty, truth, joy, freedom, love, non-violence, or social service? When have I ever heard students called to virtue without apology? When have simplicity and surfing with nature’s I/Thou flows been valued over complicatedness and expressionism? When have I asked my students to create places as environments for human and ecological development?