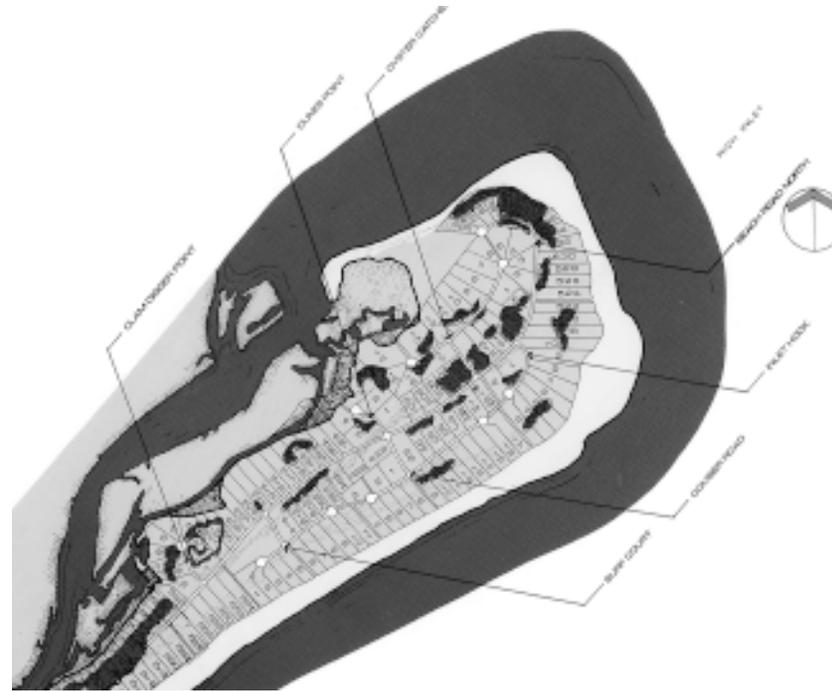


A Tidal Retreat

The previous thoughts and observations about conditions of tophophilia propelled the specific choice of a thesis project and program. For the past decade, I have traveled regularly to a four-mile long barrier island off the coast of North Carolina. The barrier island as a geological condition is typical along much of the east coast of the United States, but it is a distinctly different condition from the sea islands referenced in the writings of Pat Conroy. Sea islands are a particular geological condition of intricately interwoven mazes of tidal creeks surrounding scores of small islands for miles and miles inland. From northern Florida to Cape Romain, South Carolina, these islands reconcile the meeting of ocean and land. Areas surrounding Charleston, Hilton Head, Beaufort, and Savannah and St. Simons in Georgia, those are the sea islands, most of which have no direct view of the ocean nor of the mainland; they are fully bounded by tidal creeks and marshlands.

For the thesis project I selected instead a site on a barrier island off the coast of North Carolina, just northeast of Wilmington. Although the single swath of marsh existing between the barrier islands of North Carolina and the nearly linear boundary of the mainland offers only remnants of the sensual richness, topographic complexity, and environmental diversity of the sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia, Figure Eight Island provided both familiar and accessible terrain for my thesis exploration. It was only through such frequent trips to the site that I felt I could adequately address this notion of reading architectural opportunities contained within the landscape.

Figure Eight Island is simply a retreat – a collection of residences with no commercial activities. The experiences of my visits there guide programmatic considerations in this project. Some visits have been with groups of more than twenty people, while other trips have been with just a few close friends. I have also traveled there alone.



## Retreat

Pierre Zoelly writes that every architect needs to have a retreat.<sup>31</sup> Two definitions of the word ‘retreat’ reveal a duality which is present throughout the mental construct of this project: first, as a place of privacy or safety – a refuge; and alternatively, as a period of group withdrawal.<sup>32</sup> **Thus, ‘retreat’ is both a place and a period of time.** The program is for a retreat, a house to be constructed along the marshfront, to be inhabited by those seeking a retreat in its dual definition as both place of refuge and period of withdrawal.

In his sketchbook entitled *Atlantic Revisited*, Zoelly also distinguishes between a mountain architect and an ocean architect, the former whose primary dimension is

vertical, and the latter, whose anchoring geography is horizontal.<sup>33</sup> The sandy beaches of the south Atlantic states are a malleable, changeable recipient of the repeated pounding imparted by wave and tidal action. Whereas rocky Pacific coast hillsides are lost forever to the abrasive intrusions of the Pacific, the shoreline of the South Atlantic is not truly lost, only displaced in a continuous transformation of place. In each case, however, there is the lure of the distant horizon.

The selected site offers some topographical variation in the form of dunes. Four Dunes Point is located on the inland side of the island, with an entry approach from the east, natural dunes and coastal underbrush along the southern edge, and unobstructed views of the marsh from slightly south of west to slightly east of north.



## Temporal Rhythms

Human activities in lowlying coastal areas are fundamentally ordered by natural rhythms. In a cosmic landscape of expansive sky and little geographic definition, it is the path of the sun which provides spatial orientation.<sup>34</sup> The web-like complexity of seemingly infinite tidal creeks undulating through marshlands imprison those boaters careless enough to be caught at low tide. In this place, spatial consciousness is subjugated to temporal awareness. Furthermore, as noted by Ernst Cassirer, spatial orientation and differentiation into hierarchically ordered directions and zones is fundamentally analogous to temporal divisions into various phases and periods.<sup>35</sup>

In a coastal environment, the paramount temporal cycle is not a day or seasons, but the tides. The nuances of changing conditions of daylight, varying atmospheric conditions, the impending calm of sunset, uncommonly rough surf on a clear, calm day, are all critical percepts in the significance of place, but no cycle is more crucial to the occupant of a barrier island than the changing tides. A full moon brings the lunar tide, the highest high tide of each lunar cycle. It is during this period that island inhabitants are most susceptible to the destructive forces of nature, especially flooding and erosion.

Obsessive scientific and technological quantification has permeated our society's lifestyle, disengaging "the mythical unity of space and time" from daily activities.<sup>36</sup> In addressing the consequent phenomenological implications, Juhani Palismaa writes of the flatness of time, or our sequential experience of an instantaneous "series of unrelated presents."<sup>37</sup> R.D. Dripps offers the following:

*To hold the cyclical patterns of the days,  
seasons, or generations as merely historical  
robs these of the predictable repetition that  
gives a direct sensual structure to our  
lives.<sup>38</sup>*

## Monasticism

For fourteen centuries the tradition of Monasticism has been intricately tied to the rhythms of hours, days, and seasons.<sup>39</sup> Through regular and repetitive activities contained in a monk's typical day, a transcendence of time occurs. The monastic prayers of the hours, as outlined in St. Benedict's Rule, facilitate this transcendence by lifting the experience of the moment to the absolute, emptying from one's secular consciousness the need to exist outside of the now, either through worries or concerns about the past or future.<sup>40</sup> Each of the monastic prayers of the day enables monks to respond to natural rhythms in a peaceful continuum of existence that acknowledges not the twentieth century notion of time as an equal division of measured hours, but instead as spiritual oneness, timelessness.<sup>41</sup>

David Steindl-Rast, of the Order of St. Benedict, writes, "Monasticism's central message, which is expressed through the chant, is the supreme importance of time and how we relate to it: how we caretake and respond to the present moment, to what is before us now."<sup>42</sup> From the individual cell of the one-time monastery of San Marco in Florence, the warm light of afternoon dances through the wooden window frame and shutter, bracketing in soulful solitude the presence of nature in the cloister, the centering refuge for contemplation of nature's rhythms of the seasons, hours, and days. Steindl-Rast continues:

*The message of the hours is to live daily with the real rhythms of the day. To live responsively, consciously, and intentionally, directing our lives from within, not being swept along by the demands of the clock, by external agendas, by mere reactions to whatever happens. By living in the real rhythms, we ourselves become more real. We learn to listen to the music of this moment, to hear its sweet implorings, its sober directives. We learn to dance a little in our hearts, to open our inner gates a crack more, to hearken to the music of silence, the divine life breath of the universe.*<sup>43</sup>



The significance of time extends far beyond the realm of monastic life and architecture. Twentieth century American architect Ben Johnson wrote about the need for architecture to respond to natural rhythms:

*But as designers, do we see nature's constant motion in our works?  
Or do we plan fixed systems for fixed moments of time?  
What about the coming of morning, of noon and night?  
What about the incredible evolutions Caused by the sequence of hot-cold, wet-dry?  
What about our growth from birth through old age?*<sup>44</sup>

The investigation herein seeks an ameliorative acknowledgement of the forces of nature, specifically in this coastal environment. The question of permanence, and perhaps mortality, is an intrinsic and necessary consideration in a world altered continuously, at paces inconsistent with the notion of the passage of time for inhabitants of other areas. Migration of soils, migration of inlets, the closest being Rich Inlet, at the north end of Figure Eight Island, invokes a radical reconsideration of the notion of permanence.

Can architecture somehow impart unavoidable cognition of cyclical recurrences as an act of atonement for being in this place? Might not an architecture which manifests an enriched perceptual experience, one acknowledging the complexity of surrounding natural conditions, be offered as a more gentle, deferential proposition of human settlement, however tentative, in this world.

*A house may seem built for a practical purpose, but in fact it is a metaphysical instrument, a mythical tool with which we try to introduce a reflection of eternity into our momentary existence.*<sup>45</sup>

Juhani Pallasmaa



Horizon Watercolor Study



## Initial Design Act

In the “open grassland of the prairie the low undulating line of the land is dominated by the gigantic cloudless blue sky. The resulting effect is a sensation of unlimited flatness in all directions and the sky seems to curve overhead into a celestial dome.”<sup>46</sup> In the Carolina coastal plains and tidal marshes, that flatness is bound only by the nearly linear abstracted figure of the tree tops along the Intracoastal Waterway to the west and the expansive horizontality of the ocean to the east.

The celestial dome acquires a special, sensual relationship with the human through its presentation of temporal rhythms, subtly and incessantly altered by persistent ocean breezes sweeping salt-laden moisture droplets across the barrier islands. These sea breezes often flow in conflicting directions with the prevailing winds of the overhead jet stream bringing weather systems from the west. It is this intermingling and multi-directional flow which creates spectacular cloud formations of an unusual vertical dimension and depth, a layering which yields an intriguing spatiality that simply is not present in the line of the distant horizon. The sky becomes definer space, in contrast with deep forests, ravines and ridges where the land itself delimits perceived space by bounding it in three-dimensions.<sup>47</sup> This spatial differentiation is more evident near sunset or sunrise, when the light of the sun travels a greater distance through earth’s atmosphere, subsequently imbuing these times with a sensual richness of colors, presented through the low sea-borne clouds which become abstract figures playing on the palette of the sky.

Presentation of sky and horizon, acknowledgement of edge between sea and sand together grant an understanding of space in this place, as that defined by the cyclical, by the path of the sun.