

## 15 Learning from Mesa Verde

### A Case Study in the Modern Interpretation of Anasazi Design

*Anthony Anella*

*New Mexico-based architect Anthony Anella, who provided the initial impetus for the Mesa Verde symposium, contemplates contemporary design and urban problem solving through the lens of his understanding of Anasazi-Pueblo values. He illustrates his perceptions by applying them to a hypothetical new visitors' center at Mesa Verde National Park.*

Which comes first: the blessing or the prayer? It is not easy in this landscape to separate the role of man from the role of nature. The plateau country has been lived in for centuries, but the human presence is disguised even from the camera's eye. There are ruins like geological formations, disorders of tumbled stone. There are immense arrays of slowly crumbling rocks that look like ruins.

—J. B. Jackson, *The Essential Landscape*

The Mesa Verde rises abruptly at the entrance to the park, revealing sedimentary strata deposited over epochs of geologic time. The Cliff House Sandstone caps the mesa; underlying it is the Menefec Formation, a layer of shale that outcrops on the steep canyon slopes (Erdman, Douglas, and Marr 1969:15–16). This geologic sequence is architecturally significant. As water seeps down through the sandstone, it meets the impervious shale, which forces it to migrate laterally to the canyon walls. There, a process of freezing and thawing undercuts the sandstone cliff where it is in contact with the impervious shale strata. This weathering process produces not only the numerous large alcoves that shelter the cliff dwellings, but also the very stones the Anasazi used to build their dwellings. At Mesa Verde, the relationship between geology and architecture is a remarkable one: the great palaces of sandstone are inconceivable without the protec-

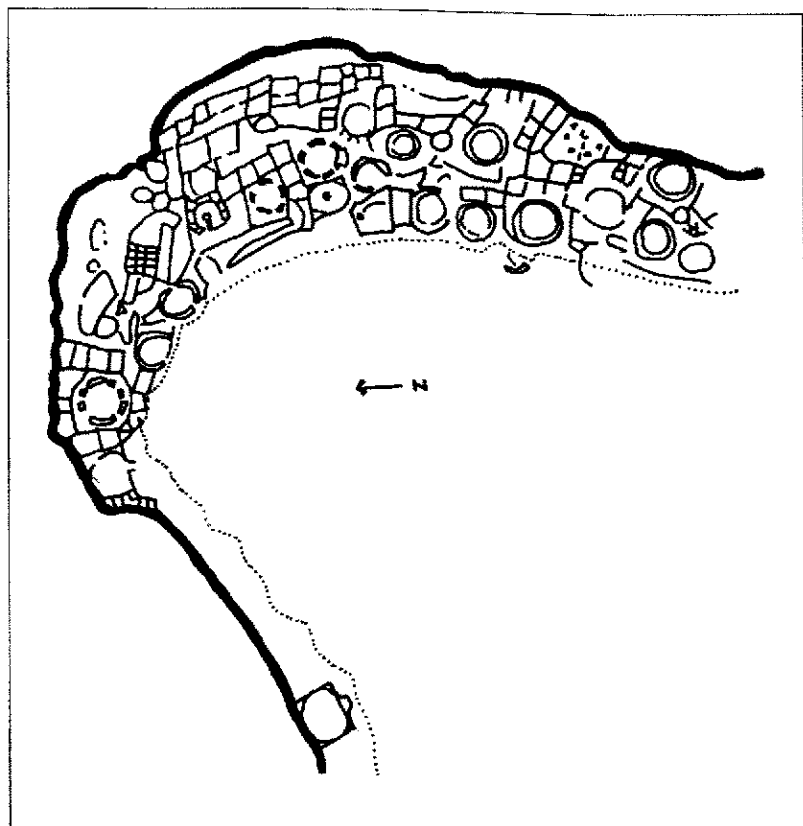


Fig. 15.1. Cliff Palace in relationship to the cliff. Drawing by Anthony Anella

tive alcoves of the surrounding rock. Here, architecture is given meaning by an order established by geology.

When we visit Cliff Palace, for example, we perceive it to be in a certain equipoise in relation to the surrounding natural setting. What makes this place so special is that the plan of the building conforms to the pre-existing order of the cliff rather than to a preconceived order of human intervention (Fig. 15.1). The dry-laid masonry walls run either parallel or perpendicular to the natural slope of the alcove floor. Further, the walls are laid just inside the drip line of the protective alcove overhead. Whether this is inadvertent due to the limitations of Anasazi technology (because they had no bulldozers, they had to conform to the existing to-

pography) or intentional is immaterial. The architecture of the Anasazi at Mesa Verde achieves a compelling balance between the human program and the geological circumstances and topographical idiosyncracies of the site. A tangible sense of place develops in their architecture because it is premised on a powerful sense of belonging to a larger natural whole.

Karsten Harries has expressed this notion well: "One task of architecture is still that of interpreting the world as a meaningful order in which the individual can find his place in the midst of nature and in the midst of community. Time and space must be revealed in such a way that human beings are given their dwelling place, their *ethos*" (1983:16). Harries links the problem of arbitrariness in modern design to our greater freedom. "To this," he writes, "one may object that freedom has here been grasped inadequately, because only negatively: true freedom is not freedom from constraint, but rather to be constrained only by what one really is, by one's essence" (1983). Modern man has emancipated himself from many of the natural constraints that confronted the Anasazi. In the process, modern man has also lost his sense of belonging to a larger natural whole.

Much of contemporary architecture is object oriented without regard for what happens around buildings. By featuring buildings as pure objects, contemporary architecture neglects the implications of what happens in between buildings.

In the Anasazi architecture at Mesa Verde, special attention is paid to the "in-between" realm: the places where the additive modules join or are purposely kept apart. For example, Spruce Tree House does not separate individual buildings from how they operate within the whole. What each part means in a qualitative sense depends on what they mean in terms of each other. Similarly, Cliff Palace is not one object but a composition of many. The object is subordinated by its repetition, which precludes hierarchy in the object-oriented sense. All modules are treated structurally and spatially the same. Only their relation to each other and the surrounding cliff gives them their quality and their meaning. The relationship between the figurative void of the surrounding cliff and the figurative volume of the architecture transcends an emphasis on either one or the other. Cliff Palace provides a counterform for the surrounding cliff: a figure to complement the void of the sandstone amphitheater. It symbolizes the other half of the dual relationship between man and nature, which an emphasis on either one or the other precludes.<sup>1</sup>

This is the real significance of Anasazi architecture to contemporary

American design: how the example of Anasazi architecture can help to reconcile the contemporary relationship between man and nature. It serves as a reminder of how architecture can help “the individual find his place in the midst of nature and in the midst of community.” Joseph Rykwert has defined a similar idea as “the return to origins”:

The return to origins is a constant of human development, and in this matter architecture conforms to all other human activities. The primitive hut—the home of the first man—is therefore no incidental concern of theorists, no casual ingredient of myth or ritual. The return to origins always implies a rethinking of what you do customarily, an attempt to renew the validity of your everyday actions, or simply a recall of the natural (or even divine) sanction for your repeating them for a season. In the present rethinking of why we build and what we build for, the primitive hut will, I suggest, retain its validity as a reminder of the original and therefore essential meaning of all building for people: that is, of architecture.

(1981:192)

The present rethinking of why we build and what we build for derives from the changing view Americans have of the land and their place within it. Informed with evidence of the greenhouse effect and the destruction of the ozone layer, we no longer abide the frontier perception of the land as a surfeit to be merely exploited. Our deteriorating environment causes us to rethink the way we customarily inhabit the earth. Must we not now develop an understanding of dwelling more appropriate to our changed environmental situation? And does not the architecture of the Anasazi at Mesa Verde suggest strategies for the design of contemporary buildings that will help man to live with the land and not merely on or in spite of it?

It is within the context of these two questions that I would like to discuss my design for a visitors' center and an archaeological research and storage facility for Mesa Verde National Park as a case study in the modern interpretation of Anasazi architecture. How we interpret the past as well as how we imagine the future are both conditioned by the concerns and preoccupations of the present.<sup>2</sup> The central concern of our time is man's relationship to nature. Nothing is more important to our future than rebuilding the equilibrium that sustains our life. Given this central concern, then, there are at least two possible interpretations of our Anasazi past as we try to control the development of an uncertain future. One interpre-

tation is that the Anasazi lived in complete harmony with nature; this interpretation sees Anasazi architecture as Adam's house in paradise. The second interpretation is that the Anasazi did not live in complete harmony with nature. According to park archaeologist Jack Smith (1985, p.c.), the story of Mesa Verde is "the story of a people trying to make a living in an arid land—at first as hunter-gatherers by dealing with the circumstances of their livelihood and then as farmers by planting the circumstances of their livelihood as they simultaneously disrupted the balance of their own existence." I find this second interpretation more convincing, not only because it seems more factual, but also because it serves certain rhetorical purposes. Whether it was overpopulation, drought, a cooling trend, or a combination that caused the abandonment of Mesa Verde, the important story the proposed visitors' center and archaeological research and storage facility can help to tell is that Mesa Verde National Park preserves a prehistoric precedent for many of our contemporary environmental dilemmas.

In 1990, Mesa Verde National Park attracted more than seven hundred thousand visitors from most states of the nation and many countries of the world. They are generally unfamiliar with the area and the natural and human history that make it so distinctive. In fact, the tradition to which most park visitors belong is a tradition that tries to organize the landscape according to a preconceived grid of square-mile sections. This tradition is manifested in the way we survey the land and in the rectilinear boundaries of the states that come together at the Four Corners. It is also manifested in the string line grids that archaeologists use to orient themselves in what is perceived to be the disorder of an archaeological site before it is excavated.

The Anasazi of Mesa Verde and their descendants, the Pueblo Indians of Arizona and New Mexico, orient themselves to the environment differently. In looking at the ruins at Mesa Verde, I learned that what makes those places so special is that they conform to the pre-existing order of the cliff. In looking at the planning of the pueblos in New Mexico, I learned that the way they are organized is, again, not according to any preconceived rectilinear grid but rather according to perceivable landscape features. For example, Sandia Pueblo, just outside of Albuquerque, deflects the major axis of the central plaza away from the east-west grid to orient it toward the central horns of Sandia Mountain (Fig. 15.2).

I have adopted a similar strategy in my design. The proposed site is on the right side of the road as one enters the park just after passing through

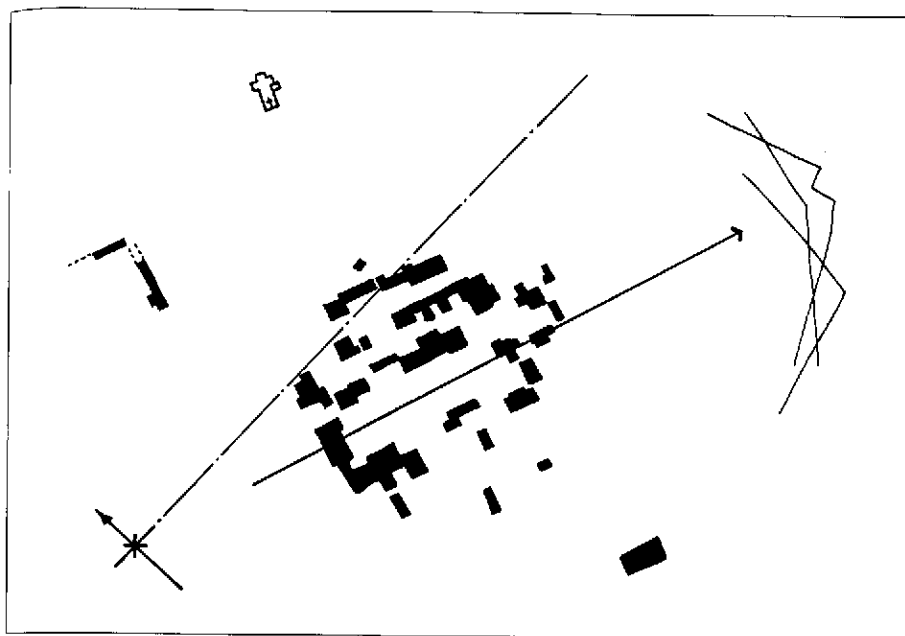


Fig. 15.2. Orientation of Sandia Pueblo. Drawing by Anthony Anella

the entry station. It is located on a ridge that affords views to Sleeping Ute Mountain to the west, Mount Hesperus of the La Plata Mountains to the east, and perhaps most dramatically, southward to Point Lookout, which is the northernmost part of the mesa which one sees upon entering the park. These three landscape features are especially important in the planning of the design. Entrance into the facility is along an axis that is anchored at one end by the landscape feature of Sleeping Ute and at the other end by Mount Hesperus. Once the visitor enters the complex of buildings, his attention is drawn to Point Lookout. From the very beginning, the visitor is made aware of these landscape features and begins relating himself to them.

I began by saying that the Anasazi architecture at Mesa Verde is given meaning by an order established by geology. This design responds to that order by including the natural landscape in a composition of built forms that narrate the story of Mesa Verde (Fig. 15.3). Upon entering the plaza, the visitor's attention is drawn to the Mesa Verde by a series of repetitive forms that make up the visitors' center. Each form corresponds to a room housing a different period of Anasazi cultural development. Each is on a

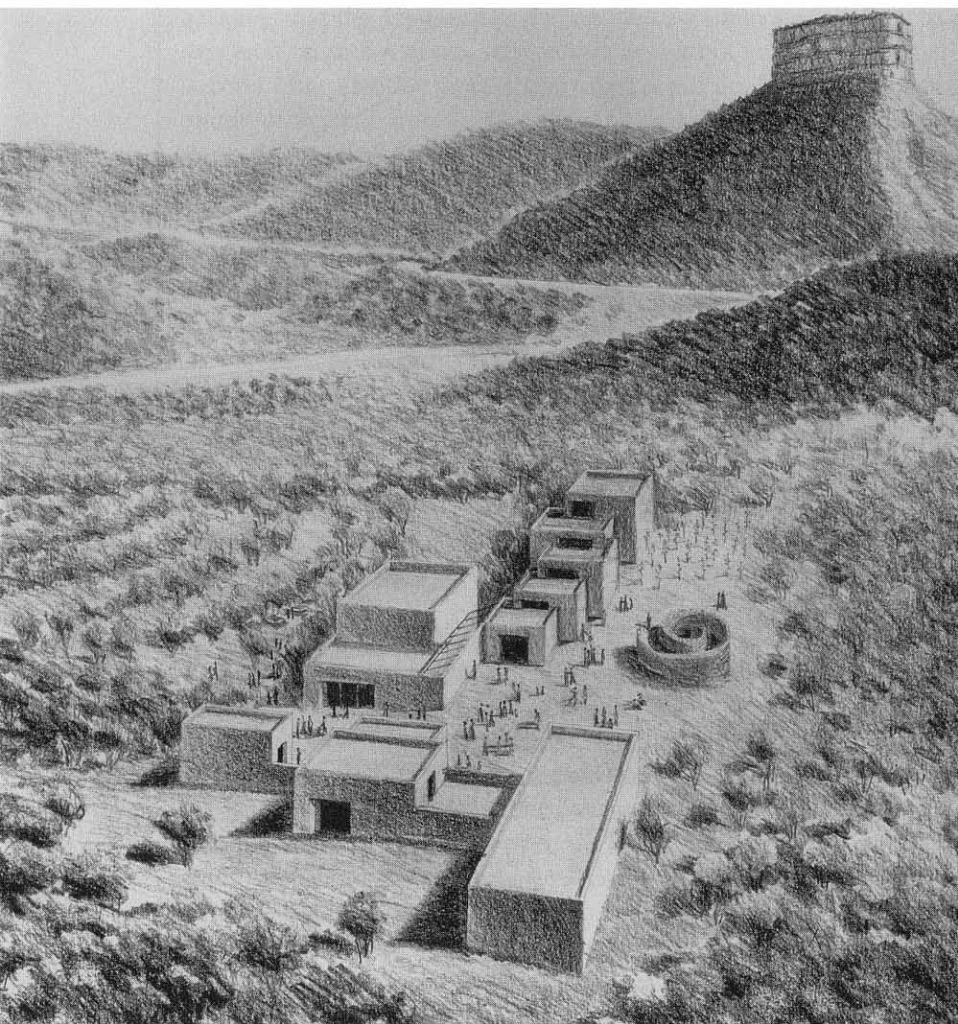


Fig. 15.3. Sketch of visitors' center. Design by Anthony Anella.  
Drawing by D. E. Jamieson

different level so that the visitor's experience of walking through the period rooms, of ascending from earliest to latest, from Basketmaker to Classic Pueblo, is the reverse experience that an archaeologist would have digging down through the cultural strata of a site. The period rooms complement the existing experience available to the visitor by giving back to

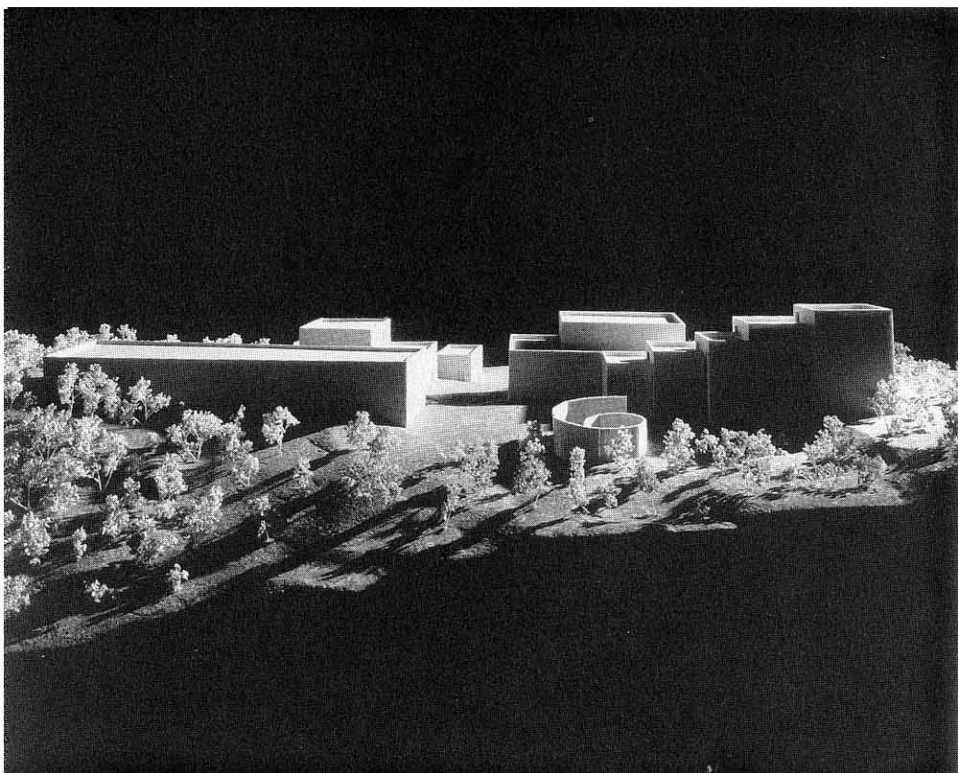


Fig. 15.4. View of visitors' center model. Photo by Anthony Anella

him the excitement of seeing artifacts displayed in facsimiles of the original context.<sup>3</sup> They function as “life-size dioramas” and complement the miniature dioramas that are a favorite of visitors to the Chapin Mesa Museum near the center of the Park. And when viewed from the entrance plaza, the cultural strata represented by the layers of the visitors' center are juxtaposed with a view of the geologic strata of the mesa, accentuating the connection between the human story of Mesa Verde and the story of the land.

The spiral feature is an abstracted *sipapu*, or sacred spring. It consists of a sandstone masonry wall enclosing a spiraling ramp. Down the ramp, emanating from a fountain at the center, runs a stream of water that irrigates a nearby cornfield. This is a place for the visitor to get away from



the crowds and have a chance to contemplate the role of water in the story of Mesa Verde.

The material to be used in the visitors' center and archaeological research and storage facility is a specially designed masonry block that matches the color of the sandstone on Point Lookout. The abstracted *sipapu* is to be made of natural sandstone and replicates the masonry techniques of the Anasazi. The juxtaposition of these two masonry techniques—the ancient and the modern—provides the visitor with a sense of the continuum between the seven-hundred-year-old masonry technology of the Anasazi and the masonry technology used today.

The profound lesson we can learn from the architecture of the Anasazi is the perception of man as a part of nature, not separate from it. My design is intended to apply this lesson by re-establishing the dialogue between the original and the contemporary, between archaeology and architecture, between the land and how we build on it. By juxtaposing the view between the cultural strata represented by the different layers of the visitors' center and the geologic strata of the Mesa Verde, this design also is intended to emphasize the connection between the story of man as told by archaeology and the story of the land as told by geology. This relationship between human time and geologic time is an important one. For when we begin to perceive ourselves as part of the larger continuum, then perhaps the choices we make will be based on less short-sighted decisions.

Seven hundred years after the Anasazi abandoned Mesa Verde, archaeologists began to excavate the ruins to deduce cultural meaning from the artifacts left behind by that ancient civilization. Seven hundred years from now, archaeologists will distinguish between the ruins left behind by the Anasazi and the ruins left behind by twentieth-century America. The cultural strata belonging to the modern era will be differentiated by the fact that

just as modern man has fallen out of nature, so has he fallen out of history. We may know much more about history today than ever before, but precisely in making the past an object of scientific investigation, the sense of belonging to the past is lost. We have removed ourselves too effectively from the past to still belong to it. Time has been reduced to a coordinate on which we move back and forth with equal facility. With this, the past must lose much of its authority. (Harries 1983:13).

The sublime beauty of the Mesa Verde is its ultimate indifference to man's presence. It existed before the state of equilibrium that afforded the Anasazi their livelihood, and it continues to exist long after they left. And it will continue to exist despite any choices we may make to disrupt the balance of our own evolution. It is an indifference that should remind man of his place within nature and the continuum of geologic time.

## Notes

1. I am indebted to Aldo Van Eyck for thoughts he expressed in his essay "Kaleidoscope of the Mind," *VIA I, Ecology in Design, 1968, The Student Publication of the Graduate School of Fine Arts*, University of Pennsylvania.
2. I am indebted to Professor J. J. Brody for the thoughts he expressed during the keynote address of the Mesa Verde Symposium on Anasazi Architecture and American Design.
3. Currently, the visitor is afforded the experience of visiting the ruins that have already been excavated, so that there are no artifacts inside, or he goes to the museum and sees the artifacts outside the context of their original setting. In between the ruins and the museum, he is not made aware of the archaeological process. Part of the excitement of Mesa Verde, and something that is worth the visitor's contemplation, is the archaeological process.

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