

**THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF A MODERN ARCHITECT AND HIS SENSE OF PLACE:  
HENRY KLUMB'S RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE IN PUERTO RICO, 1944-1975**

**BY**

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**DISSERTATION**

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## ABSTRACT

At the center of this dissertation is an architect's sense of place – how did it develop or grow within him, what did it consist of, and how did he apply it in his work. The architect, Heinrich “Henry” Klumb (1905-1984), was a German immigrant, a one-time associate of Frank Lloyd Wright, and from 1944 to 1984 a prolific and celebrated modern architect in the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. Within this study a sense of place is defined as the beliefs people adopt, the actions they undertake, and the feelings they develop towards those locations that through time, experience, group norms and practices, personal investment, or immediate appreciation have become important or meaningful to them.

Klumb's sense of place was a defining and demonstrable quality of his life in architecture. It was characterized by a heartfelt affection for various places where he lived and worked, and for the local populations at those places. These places and peoples included Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin, the American desert Southwest and its Native American populations, Puerto Rico's mountainous countryside and its rural working poor populations, and parts of the San Juan metropolitan area. This sense of place was evident in Klumb's reactions to and recollections of these locations and peoples. It was likewise evident in his views on what he thought to be the rightful interrelation between people and their surroundings. All of these aspects were chronicled in his collection of letters, public speeches, essays, and other private papers spanning a period of over fifty-five years.

The focus of this dissertation is twofold. First is an examination of the key events, people, experiences, and locations that impressed a sense of place on Klumb. Second is an analysis of the houses that he designed and built in Puerto Rico from 1944 to 1975. These two subjects coalesce in this dissertation based on the underlying assertions that Klumb's houses in Puerto Rico were a

direct result of those experiences that instilled in him an ability to bring together in a harmonious relationship the daily lives of people with their built and natural environments, and that with such an idea in mind Klumb in turn attempted to create houses that were meant to foster the same harmonious relationship in others. Nowhere was Klumb's fondness for a location and its peoples more evident and directly relatable than in the houses that he designed and built in Puerto Rico. That is because when we look at the many circumstances in Klumb's life that led him to value specific locations through his demonstrated beliefs, actions, and feelings, we see that these same circumstances later found direct expression in his residential practice on the island.

The principal research question of this study is: How did Henry Klumb's life experiences shape his sense of place, and consequently his houses? An important contribution of this dissertation to the scholarly research on Klumb is in applying insights derived from architectural phenomenology and other related fields to reexamine some of the key turning points over the long arc of Klumb's life and career. In doing so the aim is to uncover the very genetic makeup of Klumb's affinity for specific locations and their peoples. A crucial assumption is that a person's most deeply felt connections with various places have their genesis not in a personal philosophy or a conceptual framework. Such connections arise initially and principally out of an accumulation of experiences that are inexorably tied to where those experiences occurred. Those experiences and places then have an impact upon a person's thinking, actions, and feelings.

Through this dissertation I trace the pivotal elements that shaped Klumb's sense of place from when he emigrated from Cologne, Germany in 1927, through his seventeen year sojourn in the United States, on to his career in Puerto Rico. I also track the evolution of Klumb's houses over five decades, determine various trajectories in his residential practice in Puerto Rico, and identify four common physical and conceptual threads in his houses. These four common threads

are, first, that a principal way that Klumb fused select houses with their topographies was through the innovative use of planning grid systems. Second, Klumb's houses in Puerto Rico owed a great deal to the vernacular *Jibaro* hut of Puerto Rico's rural and working poor. Third, the principal spaces in a Klumb house were his open air rooms. These were spaces that were conceived in response to the prevailing breezes at their building sites. Fourth, Klumb's affinity with nature was so strong that even in densely-packed, urban, residential communities Klumb tried to strike a balance between natural and built elements.

This dissertation focuses on Klumb and his residential architecture for a number of reasons. First, Klumb's legacy is an important part of Puerto Rico's cultural heritage. Second, while a small number of Klumb's houses have been venerated in Puerto Rico by local architects and scholars, a full understanding of the history of his residential architecture practice is lacking. Third, given today's global imperative to safeguard the environment, Klumb's houses offer valuable lessons in sustainable design. Finally, Klumb's life and works have great potential to augment our understanding of notions of place. Specifically, this dissertation offers an opportunity to readdress issues related to organic architecture, modernism, regionalism, vernacular architecture, and environmentally and socially conscious design. It also shines a light on an important chapter in mid-twentieth century Latin American modernism.

In the end, this dissertation presents a history of a regional architect who only in recent years has begun to be recognized outside of Puerto Rico for his prodigious and nuanced merging of modern architecture and a special place. As a consequence of the history presented herein, an understanding of Klumb's sense of place serves as an example of how to study other architects with strong ties to specific places. It also serves as a guide for present and future architects so that they can reflect on and strengthen their positions on the notions of place.