

# Place and Social Transformation

An Interview and Conversation with C. Otto Scharmer

By Renee A. Levi, Ph.D.  
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Massachusetts Institute of Technology Dome and Charles River Walkway

In this interview, Otto shares his observations on how the physical environment – place and space – have influenced his work with groups intent on the transformation of social systems. He also offers a vision for what kinds of places and spaces could be created that would amplify these efforts. The interview contains the following topics:

- *Grounding the Conversation by an Overview of POP Research So Far*
- *Creating a Meeting Place: Simplicity; Flexibility; Something Old and Something New*
- *A Network of Places Can Embody Collective Intention Like Global Acupuncture Points*
  - *Each Place Has Its Own Energy Field: Is It Working for What Purposes? Or Not?*
- *Establishing a Home for Intellectual Energy Would Enable a Different Level of Learning*
  - *Rural Settings: Nature as Gateway and History as Part of the Chemistry of a Place*
- *Rivers Can Hold Creation and Destruction; Mountains Can Uplift and Help Break Old Habits*
  - *Requirements of a Place to Set Context are Different at Each Stage of the U-Process*
- *Transforming Social Architecture With Spaces Between: Inside Going Out & Outside Going In*

### *Grounding the Conversation*

COS: Since you've already done some interviews in an earlier phase of your research, what were some of the findings that interested or surprised you most? What do you consider important, or key, and worth deeper inquiry?

RL: I interviewed eight people who were facilitators or conveners of groups or were stewards of particular gathering places. I asked them to describe one extraordinary experience in a group, one that felt transformational, and describe the place or space within which it happened. Seven characteristics of place were identified and I can describe them briefly here.

The first was the place's location in a natural environment and people's attunement to its aliveness. Another was the design, configuration, and contents of the space—things like size, how chairs are arranged, windows and lighting, a welcoming entrance, etc. People also identified beauty or the aesthetics of a place, whether that was a lovely waterfall nearby or art and artifacts brought into the space. It did not surprise me that these three were mentioned. I would call these “visible” aspects of a place.

What interested me more were the next four, more “invisible” aspects people talked about. One was that the history of a place affects what happens there now. For example, knowing that a spot in the American Southwest was where warring tribes once put down their weapons to talk of peace gave a contemporary group context in which to work. Also, the intention with which the founder established the retreat center—for healing or creative thinking, for example—affected the potential for such activities to take place.

Another quality mentioned by most of the people I interviewed is that places accumulate and hold energy from the activities of people who came before them. The energy they were describing was of a physical nature, felt in their bodies as well as emotionally and psychologically, and it seemed to become more powerful over time. It can be positive or negative, and needs to be

understood and worked with for the group to achieve its goals in the present. This fascinates me and is worthy of further study. Is it possible, for example, for stored energy in a place to be shifted in order to clear it from the effects of a violent past?

The people I interviewed were also aware that the group they were in was connected to larger “wholes,” such as communities surrounding the center, nature and the land itself, extended networks of people in other places, and the invisible or universal aspects of life. This awareness of connection to larger wholes affected the work they did together.

Finally, for all of the people I interviewed, there existed a deep love, respect, and reciprocity with the place they were describing. By reciprocity I mean that these people were in what Martin Buber would describe as an I-Thou relationship with the place. They experienced it as alive, worthy of being heard and respected rather than simply used. This is a very significant finding, in my opinion, and underpins the work we are doing in this phase of the Powers of Place Initiative. It is a very different relationship between people and place than the one that has resulted in man’s destruction of the natural environment. That’s what I’ve found out so far, Otto.

COS: Thank you. That helps me ground this conversation.

RL: So would you tell me about how you experience the many places you work in with groups?

COS: Well, at the very least, I am often bothered by the lack of quality of the place where I find myself. More often than not, we end up in the more traditional hotels and I find I have to work around the place instead of with it. This has bothered me for a while, and I have been writing and speaking about it.

For example, here in the Boston area I would like to create a place that has some of the characteristics you talked about. It would be more functional for the larger type of group work I often do. It is surprising that in Boston, which is a hot spot for knowledge work and think tanks in this part of the world, and a place to which the whole world travels to have meetings of different sorts, there is no place that really has the dimensions we just talked about. I've been working on changing that.

RL: Can you describe the kind of place that you're dreaming of?

### *Creating a Meeting Place*

COS: It would look very different in different places. It would really link to the context. I don't think there is an abstract list that you can impose on reality. It's really going to the places and letting those places reveal themselves. For example, it would look different in an inner-city environment. I could imagine moving into an old factory hall and redoing it, taking something very old where you can still smell the history in the walls. Maybe it was a sweatshop. You wouldn't tear it down; you would put in the new. You might take down walls and break up the roof to have more light coming through. This would link it more to the 21<sup>st</sup> century without destroying the old; do it in the context of the old.

I would change the large space so it would work for the deep group work that we do, linking the functional with the aesthetic, with a deeper awareness of the spiritual dimension. I would also include multimedia and use it to connect individuals and groups from around the world who occasionally visit. It would be a blended thing—something between the sweatshop and a Buddhist temple in terms of its simplicity and clarity.

I would love to have a modern theater, too, where you can move the stage around, not just have it stuck in one place, and use it to engage the audience. You could quickly move the

audience center stage, recontextualizing where the front, middle, and back are by the use of light and other materials. But basically, we are looking for simplicity. In all the group work that we do we want to be very flexible and be able to move quickly from a café style to something more like a theater to something that looks entirely different.

When you walk up to the Cathedral of Chartres no one needs to explain what that place is about. Your whole body picks it up instantly. You don't need a long speech. You know it the moment you see it, you know it the moment you enter it. Yes, you can benefit from some additional explanation, but it's not really necessary. That's the way the space I am imagining should work. No one has to give you a long speech about what it is. The moment you enter the space your body picks it up. This is essential for a place that would be one of the "new cathedrals," which are essentially about transforming social fields—allowing social fields to drop into and connect with their dormant and deeper levels of awareness and consciousness and to start operating from there. That's really what transformation work is about, and it can be greatly enhanced with the right kinds of places. That is what is usually lacking.

RL:        So you would know the intention when you walk in?

### ***Global Acupuncture Points***

COS:        Yes, not necessarily to articulate it, but you would feel it. Your body would get it. The moment you entered you'd feel the buzz of human connection. You would even feel some of that without the people there. The place would embody the intention and the reality of the larger place and the larger network that it is connected to. The ancient mystery places in wisdom traditions, for example, didn't exist for themselves alone. They always were part of a larger geography of power places. I think about the geography of power places in terms of *global acupuncture points*, not just as physical places but as globally distributed action research universities that integrate science, spirituality, and profound social change. Each of these places would be an intentional element of a

larger whole. There are prototypes that already exist. But they are not pulled together as a global network of acupuncture points that could begin to work together at a higher level of awareness.

RL: Otto, you said earlier that the building has to be appropriate for the place, that it's important to listen to the place and have the structure grow out of it. So I imagine that an acupuncture point in India or Indonesia, for example, would be different from the type of setting you described in Boston?

### *Each Place has Its Own Energy Field*

COS: Very different. Thank you for reminding me. I started by describing one extreme, which is an urban place, but there would also be rural places. In both of these places access to nature is key. Having nature be present, as a teacher, is important in urban and rural places, both in terms of architecture—like having large windows—and also in terms of functional accessibility. The design should make it possible to move 100 or 200 people in small groups very quickly outside for walks in nature. This is a functional requirement for the type of workshops we do in all settings.

You may have a new building that is embedded in the landscape and the environment that you are a part of. Each of these places would look different because they are in different geographies, but they probably would have a number of similarities or principles. So the presence of and access to nature is an important aspect of all acupuncture points.

Each place and geography has its own energy field. Is it working or not? And for what type of work is it working? The principles are sometimes clearer in consciousness and sometimes more intuitive, less rigorously scientific. Yet if you make decisions, or choices, you need to go into a place and move out all the senses that you have and ask yourself, “is this working?” Is this conducive to the kind of work we want to do? In that regard, you probably also factor in a number of other deeper aspects of place that are related to energy, things that have a big impact on how transformative group work is unfolding.

RL: Do you think that rural and urban settings are equally effective for the transformative work you do with groups?

### *Establishing a Home for Intellectual Energy*

COS: That's a good question. Right now I don't have either. If I had an urban setting it would be here in Cambridge, on campus at MIT. It would be easily accessed by students, faculty, and international visitors. It would be a roundtable of events, a global classroom, an intellectual center of gravity for lots of things. If it were situated in places like MIT or Harvard, it would give students instant access to a totally different intellectual field. When students come here they already are exposed to new ideas about profound societal and ecological change, but there is nowhere on campus that provides a "home" for the energy. If we could create a home in the way we just described it, that could have a major effect, maybe doubling the impact of our work and the whole network of people we are connected with. It would contribute to an entirely new level of learning.

RL: So the building would serve as a kind of trigger point for the intellectual energy field in Cambridge?

COS: Yes, what we've been talking about is an example of the urban setting, and the building would require the kind of urban design that would make possible the techniques and the culture of prototyping, including industrial design and the creative arts, which are among the practices that we deal with in the social technologies of Presencing. The space would make possible an artistic linking of science, art, and practice-based learning. People would come in and reflect on the fieldwork they do.

Building it here, we could also harness the energy of the Charles River, which is very powerful too. The Charles River is balancing. If it did not exist, the intellectual intensity would be depressing. The Charles River balances the energy, it's a place you can go to really open up and refresh your mind. The balance of these two fields is important.

The other type of setting is outside the city, in a retreat-type center where nature functions as a gateway. In a retreat center you would get away from the noise. When you do deeper

transformative group processes over a period of three, four, or five days, which we often do, that's where you would need to go. It would be a container in which all of the participants in the social field could be connected and go through a collective journey, a process enhanced by being a little removed from the noise of the day. These kinds of practices require a place that is more contained and more focused on a presence and power of the natural place, more than you'd have on campus at MIT.

### *Rural Settings*

Ideally, the place would have a history from the pre-Western Indian culture. The history of the place would be part of the chemistry of how things unfold in the center, as would the design of the building and the social process design and delivery of the work. You would be linked to the ancient traditions that existed and were later suppressed. Those voices would be brought back in through the architecture, through process design—always relating to the intentionality of the space. Of course it would be different here in the U.S. than it would be in Asia or South Africa, or other places around the world. There is a different energy geography. The place would look different and yet also connect to the same deep sources.

RL: In both of your examples, it's the energy, intention, and history of the place that you're tapping into. Cambridge is about knowledge and not just about knowledge today. It's all the thinking that's gone on there for many years. It's a knowledge field grounded in a particular place. In a more rural setting, it's more the energy of nature. So you're pointing to the existence of at least two different kinds of energy fields grounded in place—knowledge fields and natural, or living systems, fields. Is that right?

COS: Yes, and for both, you want to preserve the old rather than demolishing it and doing something entirely new. Keep it but transform it. You transform it but you still leave the traces. You preserve the footprint of history without being stuck in it.



RL: That reminds me of what you said about the warehouse earlier. You want to leave traces, not necessarily the whole thing. Another way you can do that is by beginning a gathering by speaking of the history of the place. The group doesn't know the history. Even that level of awareness has the potential to enhance the group's experience.

COS: Renee, if we shared with each other the most interesting places that we have been in, what comes to your mind?

### *Rivers and Mountains*

RL: One of the most magical places I've been is the Ganges River in Varanasi, India. Actually, many places in India affect me profoundly. Spirituality lives in the land there. It's still a largely agrarian culture and one that is deeply community-based. I'm surprised that what many Westerners feel toward India is pity because of the pervasive poverty and lack of basic infrastructure. I understand that but yet when I go there, I have a sense that people are quite happy and feel a connection—to the land, to each other, and to spirit—that we in the West are losing. All that is changing now, with its economic growth, but I'm hoping India doesn't lose what it can share with the world about deeper connections. In Varanasi, this spirituality is amplified because of the deep reverence Hindus have for the Ganges River. You see the circle of life unfold before your eyes. Ashes of recently cremated people are sprinkled in the same river where young children laugh and play. Creation and destruction. Brahma and Shiva.

COS: Listening to that, there are two places that come up for me. One is the Italian-Swiss border in the Alps. It's a place called Sils-Maria, where many philosophers and writers used to go. Nietzsche was one of them. It has an uplifting, inspiring energy. I love going to that place and hiking high up. There are huge mountains around you—it's uplifting and opening. Sometimes mountains are oppressive, narrowing your space upward. It is the opposite there.

Another power-of-place experience was with John Milton in the Rocky Mountains, in Crestone, Colorado. What's the parallel? It's the mountains. That's also something personal. If I am taking a group to a retreat and you offer me the choice between something mellow and somewhere

high up and on granite, I'd choose the mountain. It gives me a geologic boost, is calming, and it simplifies and verifies what's happening in the mind.

RL: Your mention of mountains is interesting, Otto. I interviewed a woman who has a retreat center in Brazil. Mountains were important for her place too, but in a very different way. She described them as surrounding and protecting the valley in which her place was located. It's a place people come to heal and she says the mountains have the effect of "holding" people through their time of vulnerability and healing.

COS: Yes, and they can feel almost risky, too, like going to the edge or taking a chance. Almost like inflicting the wound rather than healing it. You want to destabilize, break the old pattern, the old routine.

RL: What's occurring to me, Otto, is a question about whether you've ever considered different kinds of places as holding mechanisms for individuals and groups going through the U-Process.

### *Requirements of Place at Each Stage of the U-Process*

COS: That's a great question. What we have just talked about would be located at the bottom of the U. Then in the Sensing stage, there are a whole lot of different things. The Sensing is really getting out of your own place, wherever that may be, and connecting to all the other places and people that are relevant to the issue or the journey or situation that you are pondering or working on. That's a whole different thing. There's a deep immersion journey into a whole number of different things outside of your normal environment. Prototyping is also contextual, but for that you need something more like the urban space I described where you are in reach of the bounds of the normal world. Yet you want a new space, a creative place where there is not too much interference from the old immune system that tries to prevent you from doing new things. It's almost like an incubation space. It gives you some shelter. Everything, before it's born, needs to go through this incubation or gestation phase. Slowly developing and adding and trying out and adapting. That's what that place would be about. At the outset, the Co-Initiation, that varies. It could be similar if that's available. It

can also be more embedded in the existing system. At the outset you connect with people where they are. Yet if you put together a more collective effort with different stakeholders as well, you also want to have a place that is conducive to that. For that you take whatever is available and close. Often it's not your ideal retreat center, but in some cases it might be, but usually not. It is very contextually dependent. The requirements are different at each stage of the U journey, particularly if you move from Sensing to Connecting to Source and then to Prototyping. It's conceivable if you have a great meeting space you could use the same space. On second thought, no, not possible. The Sensing always takes you out.

RL: Maybe it is possible if it is consciously designed. Can you have spaces within the place that serve different stages, that support and enhance different parts of the transformational journey? There is the outside. There is the inside. There is the up, the down, the corners of the room. Maybe some spaces are round and some are not. I don't know, but I think it's worth exploring.

COS: Another possibility is that for stages of the U-Process you could have two different spaces—a retreat setting in a power place in nature for connecting to source and then for the Sensing and the Prototyping a more urban space—particularly for Sensing.

There would be a whole new infrastructure that would allow for Sensing. You might bring in a leadership team, or a multi-stakeholder group. You could invite them go on a sensing journey by buying each of them a round-the-world ticket, give them four weeks and they go to all these places. That's one way to doing it, not the least expensive. But sometimes you don't have the resources or time. We could complement these "real" types of learning journeys with virtual learning journeys, where you would connect the group in Boston with a group sitting in Cape Town with a group sitting in Beijing. You would be guided or aided by some media technologies that would connect people to what's happening in an existing system. I'm thinking about recent discussion on the tuna ecosystem. The huge issue of overfishing is enormously complex: one hundred billion dollars of business with dozens of players, countries, ecosystems. If you could bring the stakeholders together and allow them to see the larger system that they collectively create, how would you do that? It's partly a question of technology, partly a question of assimilation, partly a question of high-end video technology that allows you to have a dialogue across cultures when you aren't in the same place. It's partly a process technology question. Those are the real sensing challenges today in

decision making when we see things that are stuck and not moving. A collective experience would make it possible for people to see the whole that they have collectively created. In reality they would be sitting in different cultures in different institutions, places, and geographies. That would be a big leverage point. That's a tall order. I'd call that a Sensing technology that brings people together physically and also virtually. That is a Sensing infrastructure—a place for co-sensing that I'm dreaming of developing.

RL: We've covered a wide range of topics here, Otto. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we close?

### *Transforming Social Architecture*

COS: I'm interested in architecture. In the old architecture there is a clear boundary of what is inside and what is outside. In the more interesting architecture, and definitely for the social architectures I work with, there is the space between: where the inside is going out and the outside is coming in. How can you interweave the inside and the outside of the space and the in-between? It's not only with windows. It's also ease of access. If you run a workshop, you want people to be able to move quickly and easily into nature and back. Unlike a closed space without windows, where there is total separation, you can have architecture where wood is inside and wood is outside. The lines are more and more blurred, like in some post-modern architecture. Some of the old distinctions are broken up. I look at this more from the perspective of a user than in the aesthetic sense. My work is about transforming social fields. I look for architectures that are conducive to this work and can help with it. Most architecture does not. Most places you go into aren't helpful. It's amazing how little awareness we have, what terrible places we have been developing! To be more aware and conscious about that is something that fascinates me. I haven't spent much time on it because my field is not physical but social architecture, but they affect each other big-time.

RL: Oh yes, imagine what could happen if we partnered with place, if the place could be invited in to help us with the work of social change!

Thank you for your time, Otto. By making this conversation available, we offer a way for others who are interested to join in with their ideas and experiences...and dreams.

COS: And thank you, Renee, I really enjoyed our conversation. I think now is the time, and in the next two years or so, that these different types of places we've talked about can happen.

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*Dr. C. Otto Scharmer is a Senior Lecturer at MIT, the founding chair of the Presencing Institute, and a founding member of the MIT Green Hub. He introduced the theoretical framework and practice called “presencing” in his book Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges (2007), and in Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society (2005), co-authored with Peter Senge, et al. Scharmer has consulted with global companies, international institutions, and governments in North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. He facilitates cross-sector programs for leaders in business, government, and civil society that focus on building people’s collective capacity to achieve profound innovation and change.*