

Make it Real. Make it Matter. Make it Last.

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“Sense of place” and “place making” became buzz expressions in land development, planning and design. Grounded in psychology, history, and social anthropology, Birkmayer and Ruggeri discuss Xsense authentic places’ holistic approach to generating places that are authentic, meaningful, and connected to land and people.

When we travel around the world, we fall in love with certain places. Almost every traveler becomes enchanted with the villages of Tuscany, the romance of Paris, the flavors of Thailand, the colors of India, Provence’s lavender scents, or the captivating sounds and movements of the Hawaiian hula dance. Such experiences go deep under the skin, they become unforgettable, and, over our lifetimes, they are passed on through storytelling, supported by photos, CDs, recipes, and other souvenirs. These stories define our lives, our identities. We call them magical, delightful, and unforgettable—and while they may not always be tangible, they are all too real.

A place does not exist separate from its stories. When we experience a new place, we become inevitably immersed in its architectural history, its culinary tradition, its flora and fauna—whatever it is, our exploration of a place also becomes a personal reflection of our unique passions. We like to talk about things that are meaningful to us and, thus, the story of an individual is uniquely tailored to what is meaningful to that person. Two people may have completely different stories about Paris, as one may focus on its food while the other on its artistic beauty. Both stories are true, both stories are about Paris; yet the stories are entirely different. Paris is the sum of all these stories. Places that touch us deeply and allow us to remember them as rich stories become more socially and economically sustainable than those places we forget or that never touch us at all.

Early in her career, Uta was inspired by the following comment from a successful developer at Shea Homes:

“You see, Europe has all the history. We have nothing here. What else can we do but to copy them?”

We share this comment with the creators of places (developers, planners, designers, marketers, and operators) by way of introducing them to Xsense’s philosophy on developing meaningful places that enrich lives by highlighting these stories and demonstrating how they may be incorporated into new development. For us at Xsense, it is not a matter of copying the qualities that make Paris, Venice, or Stockholm unique, but

allowing the unique qualities of each place to emerge, become apparent, and become seeds of new stories.

Uta spent many years in the hotel industry, both on the management and design sides. Through her European training where the focus was on the Art of Hospitality, and later through her American education at Cornell’s School of Hotel Management where she learned about the Industry of Hospitality, she experienced both the traditional and innovative sides of the field—two important counterparts. As her passions led her toward new hospitality developments, Uta soon learned that much of the hotel management industry focused on importing foreign themes that delighted guests for a Property Improvement Plan cycle of 8 years—still a widespread industry practice—before the ideas became stale, guests became bored, and the brand needed “refreshing”.

In the thousands of years of its history, Tuscany has never had to artificially reinvent itself. The English countryside remains fundamentally the same, the Japanese carefully repair old temples, and the Swedes lovingly restore 100-year-old baths for the enjoyment and memory making of generations. All these places are connected to their pasts, but they are not stuck in those pasts. They have found ways to tie the past to the future seamlessly that allow their cores, their authenticity to stay true to themselves and thrive. Stephen A. Mouzon describes this type of rooted authenticity as “keeping things going in a healthy way long into an uncertain future” (Figure 1).

Authenticity matters to business. Throughout Uta’s career, she has seen how customers prefer such authentic and rooted places. These places are more efficient to operate and enjoy return visits from people throughout their lifetimes. She was determined to understand what made these many valued places so sustainable, not just on an environmental level, but on the cultural, social, and emotional fronts as well. She recognized the value of this knowledge to her clients who plan new places and rethink existing ones. Thus, she made it Xsense’s mission to teach these clients about the viability of place.

Uta’s team at Xsense is made up researchers selected for their

cultural diversity and trained in the unique Xsense method (more on that later). Working with this core team is a small group of subject experts, typically university professors with specialization in areas such as social factors, history, food culture, health, wellness, and folklore, who work in synch with the Xsense team and local subject experts who are close to the site of development. These local experts usually include citizens with particular knowledge of history and culture, community leaders, and key stakeholders. As a whole, Xsense is made of motivated people who know how to reach out wide and deep to gather information as efficiently as possible, but without rushing. We visit sites, talk to locals, read, write, photograph, and film. Most of all we listen, feel, and observe. Lastly, we document and share what we have learned and refine our findings so they can be truly representative of the place.

Key Principles

As Uta developed her consulting practice over the last 12 years, she uncovered four guiding principles that have helped to inform the work Xsense and its collaborators do in the places where we operate: Experiences are Multi-Sensual; Authenticity is Found, not Made; Meaning is Different for Everyone; and Meaningful Experiences may be Transformative. Before applying these principles through a holistic approach to exciting real-life projects, it is worth describing them in greater depth and illustrating their value to authentic placemaking.

Principle 1: Experiences are Multi-Sensual

As human beings, we remember events and places more vividly when all five senses are engaged (sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste) and when we engage with people in these places. If all sensual triggers tie back to one coherent experience—the smell and energy of a spice market visit in

India, attending a lively and colorful Obon festival in Kyoto, or a Lederhos'n-slapping beer hall at the Oktoberfest in Munich—these memories become unforgettable and can be brought back easily by a signature scent or distinguishing sound bites. We share the memory in the format of stories (Figure 2).

Connected multi-sensual experiences are distinct and valuable economic offerings. They do not only deliver services, they stage experiences. In the experience market, memories are valued more than mere services, which are not memorable. A 3-star hotel room offers a service and that service is, theoretically-speaking, interchangeable with any other 3-star hotel. However, if a guest walks away with a positive memory—packaged into a story—he has made an investment in an experience, which is something well worth paying for.

Here is the key: The more senses we involve, the stronger the experiences and the memories, as long as all of these sensual touch points tie back to one common theme. Tourists may experience a night in Ernest Hemingway's room in Havana (perhaps still smelling his cigar), which may leave them inspired to buy a case of cigars and a Hemingway novel; or a witty Ian Schrager hotel that entertains the senses and makes them feel super-cool or downright awestruck. A great experience creates memories, which guests share as stories; it turns them into promoters and patrons of your brand because you have become part of theirs. The fact that they have paid for it becomes secondary to the experience. People love to buy cigars, books, and other memorabilia that help them remember and share a story that has enriched their lives.

The takeaway point here is that places are not just architecture and design, but sensorial experiences. The more senses involved, the more memorable the event, the more connected the senses, and the stronger the memory. A developer should



Figure 1: Tuscan Village. (Xsense Archives)



Figure 2: Obon Festival, Japan. (Xsense Archives)



Figure 3: Hemingway Room Havana, Cuba. (courtesy of Time & Life Pictures/Getty Image)

be aware of the fact that every investment they make into a place—in terms of architectural design, landscaping, materials, colors, scents, etc.—has the potential to promote the place to a valuable experience. As Uta always preaches: “You’re spending money on bricks, paint, finishes, systems, art, and operations. If aligned wisely, every expenditure will also “sell” the establishment, make a memory, and become part of a valuable story.”

Principle 2: Authenticity is Found, not Made

After years of hotel development experience within hospitality projects in Europe and Asia, Uta settled down in California and founded Xsense experiential design with the goal of helping developers apply the principles of experiential design to create memorable places. However, she soon learned that an experiential approach was a nice tool, but it was not enough to create places where people lived and not just visited as tourists. We like to escape to a resort, but we want to live in a truly authentic place.

There is a distinct difference between visiting Venice in Italy and staying at the Venetian Resort in Las Vegas. Both are man-made experiences. The difference is that one is authentic, while the other is fake. One is sustainable and the other is not. One is a deeply connected cultural experience, the other is a short-term escape. One has deep history, while the other will probably be torn down at some point to make way for something new (Figures 4 & 5).

In 2001, development was booming and interpretations of Tuscan, Greek, and English architecture with modern American proportions and functions were going up at an alarming rate. Xsense’s first major client, Trilogy, an upscale resort-style residential developer, already had the ubiquitous Tuscan style of architecture in place. We asked why. The answer would define Xsense’s future work. “You see, Europe has all the history. We have nothing here. What else can we do but to copy them?” It was at that moment that Uta realized an experiential approach would indeed touch on all of the senses and create a

personal (Vegas or Disney style) brand memory. However, she also realized that it was too shallow an approach to create a true place where people lived rich lives.

Why would we copy architecture from elsewhere? Because there is not an established architecture typical for the area? Because we have fallen in love with certain architecture from elsewhere and we want to replicate that feeling? We all know that a copy of a place we love will not automatically create the same feels we have about the original. One must go deeper to understand how to truly connect to the authentic place before aligning this information with the experiential principles discussed earlier. This process required going back to the originals and researching places such as Tuscany, Paris, and Venice. How did they evolve? How do places in general become what they are? What are the underlying principles that we can use to create lasting places anywhere in the world?

While themed places such as Las Vegas are created by (and for) few people in (and for) a relatively short amount of time, places that naturally evolve over a much longer time frame always work with the genius of the local people: Norwegian architect, architectural historian, and theorist, Christian Norberg-Schulz, called this *genius loci* (in Latin, the spirit of place) or phenomenology of place. What exactly does this mean? First, every place has natural resources (plants, minerals, and water), weather, an economic and sociopolitical environment, climate, etc. In these places, people have found ways to live healthy and productive lives using local resources to shelter and nourish themselves, be healthy, and find happiness and, perhaps, even fulfillment. Second, every generation passes wisdom to the next, and every new generation has the choice and common sense to adapt their ancestors’ wisdom to new situations, new trends, and their own creative thinking processes. There is always a reason why certain things are done in a certain way: the way dwellings are built was because it is most efficient, safe, economical, and beautiful. Colors and ornaments used may originate in belief systems or religions. Traditional recipes may use available crops and herbs. The design of plazas may be

Figure 4: Venice, Italy. (Xsense Archives)



Figure 5: The Venetian, Las Vegas. (Xsense Archives)



influenced by rituals and celebrations linked to historic events, moments of jubilation, and hardship the people have had to overcome. Traditions have been passed down for thousands of years, and every generation has applied these traditions to new trends and new situations.

How did pizza become today's beloved (and often copied) ubiquitous Italian specialty? Tomatoes are from South America and the idea of pita was brought back from the Middle East by the knights Templar. Tomatoes and local herbs and cheeses were placed onto the pita and, viola, pizza! Sometimes individuals travel and import ideas from elsewhere and yet, putting it all together has become an authentic Italian tradition, as has the Venetian carnival, which has deep roots in the tight spaces of Venice that allowed too little privacy. Wearing masks was common practice in business and at parties to simply create more privacy, making a very small place more livable. This practice was elevated to an art form and became a significant element of Venetian culture that still celebrated today (Figure 6).

A few years ago, Uta worked with the community of Holland, Michigan. Community members were not happy with the neighborhood designs that the developer's team produced. The developer was frustrated because he had made efforts to employ what he thought would be an appropriate Dutch style that was in synch with the town's (tourist-focused) architectural code. To understand the reason behind everyone's discontent, Xsense and its experts decided to give people cameras as part of a photovoice exercise and asked them to photograph what they loved and what they didn't love in their town. All of the Dutch-themed architecture, including the imported windmill, was on the un-loved list! Their common remark was "This is Dutch. We're not really Dutch!" So, we formed a focus group in the Netherlands and asked them what it meant to be Dutch. The result crystallized into the one single word "gezelligheid," which is an abstract noun that describes a cozy, fun, quaint atmosphere of belonging, a meaningful togetherness.

Although the residents of Holland, MI had never heard that

word, the photos of what they loved about their place reflected the Netherlands' "gezelligheid" in every sense. We explained to them what "gezelligheid" meant, and they all agreed that they were, indeed, very connected to this traditional Dutch feeling, but not necessarily to the architectural forms that created "gezelligheid" in the old country. The windmills, which were used to drain swamps, produce energy, and make the old country more livable (more "gezellig"), were meaningless in an environment that did not need windmills. What was meaningful in Holland, MI was their beloved red lighthouse, which was, indeed, the breakthrough that made the place economically viable. The result was a development scheme that lowered the cost per square foot, as residents removed the superfluous architecture in favor of smaller spaces, and rejected the use of granite in favor of more humble, less costly materials. The residents felt so connected to the Dutch word, "gezelligheid", and its feeling that they agreed unanimously to call their coffee shop 'Zellig' to remind them of this important concept that connected them to their Dutch roots (Figure 7).

The lesson learned in Holland, MI is one that can easily be transferred to other developments. Authenticity and tradition are not kept alive through architecture alone, but through symbolic meaning or special significance that sits much deeper and may be expressed differently at different times and in different places. In return, these places are made uniquely authentic, resilient, and indisputably sustainable.

At Xsense, we see this traditional and generational thinking as a tree with deep roots. In fact, we use the tree analogy in almost every conversation, as it allows a variety of people to work together democratically without intimidating design-speak. Every place is like a tree, it has roots, a trunk, branches, leaves, and fruit. If the tree is an apple tree, every year it will grow apples. Some years the apples will be bigger, sweeter, and more plentiful than others, but, the tree's DNA only allows that tree to grow apples. The roots of the tree carry the wisdom of our ancestors and new generations of fruit adapt this wisdom to their current climate. Roots are specific to a place

Figure 6: Venetian Carnival, Italy. (Xsense Archives)



Figure 7: Red Lighthouse, Holland MI. (Xsense Archives)



and its climate. If we transplant a tree, it has to adapt to a whole new environment, climate, soil, etc. Places that bear the fruit of stories are typically steeped in authenticity, traditions or roots, a creative genius or something meaningful that nurtures our passions. We may experience the taste of Carpaccio at Harry's Bar where it was invented for a special client who had dietary issues (and named after the artist exhibiting at the time), a traditional Mozart Opera performed in an innovative way; every shape and surface of the 9/11 Memorial in New York reminds us of a very recent tragedy and a way to honor our own heroes in the place that saw their demise.

By being rooted, we feel those places in deeper ways. Sitting in a Starbucks, which no longer ties you to a specific place, is not like having a cup of coffee at Caffè Florian in Venice's St. Marcos Square. The fact that this café has been operating in Venice since 1720 make the place authentic, traditional, and meaningful. The experience it provides does not rely on the coffee alone, but it engages the waiters, patron's attitudes, the music, and the romantic views of the piazza within the context of Venice's history. Taken as a whole, these experiences make its 12 Euro cup of coffee an authentic, unforgettable experience, and a meaningful story in one's life.

Quickly assembled and inauthentic places are like Christmas trees: rootless with shiny ornaments; they look good for about a month and then the tree dies and the shiny ornaments are no longer interesting. Tree-talk is part of many client, community, and stakeholder conversations at Xsense (Figure 8). People quickly understand the meaning of this metaphor regardless of their backgrounds. We actually have pre-printed tree pads we use in most client meetings. It is not unusual for locals to

identify the ornaments in their own communities and point out to architects and planners what is ornamental and inauthentic. As an Xsense expert, Deni Ruggeri has brought his research interests in place attachment and identity to our work. He has reminded us that community ornaments may often be places that support daily lives and communal activities, and it is the interaction of people around these semi-sacred landmarks where the identity of a community is formed.

When Xsense looks at places, we look for their unique diverse roots: natural resources, climate, culture, history, traditions, mysteries, food culture, health, and so forth. These ingredients fill the palette for a design team to create as they allow the new place to grow into branches that connect back to the land: architecture, art, colors, festivals, healing philosophies, hospitality concepts, and other authentic experiences.

When we can see, feel, touch, taste, and smell a place, when we can name it, remember its buildings and landscapes, language, music, art, and culture: We "feel" these roots. Many guidebooks and stories of a place connect us to its roots as we read the reasons behind the use of a particular stone or stonemason technique, the shape of the ovens that bake a unique local bread, the positioning of religious sculptures facing the sunrise. It's when a community can say "We do this because (add something meaningful here)" when we know that the connection to their roots is intact. These places teach us that everything has a reason, a story, and a real and lasting connection. Places that are authentic matter! It was this realization that led Uta to change the name of her company to Xsense Authentic Places.

"Collaborating with Xsense has reinforced for us the notion that great place making requires the ability to integrate design concepts with local customs and cultures into understandable, compelling, and memorable experiences for a project's end users. The staff at Xsense works extremely hard at going beyond the superficial aspects of a storyline, creating experiences of depth and nuance for a project."
Stuart M. Grinstain, AIA – Architect, Williams+Paddon

Figure 8: Xsense's Tree. (Xsense Archives)



Principle 3: The Meaning is Different for Everyone

What exactly are the experiences that entice people to visit and dwell in places? In Xsense's investigations, we have come across a fabulous study conducted every year that asks 100,000 people worldwide what type of experiences they value most (www.makingmeaning.org), these experiences are:

Accomplishment: Achieving goals that make something of a person or a community (e.g., a community river cleanup project).

Beauty: Anything that gives pleasure to the senses, especially when form and function blend.

Community: A sense of union with others around us (e.g., a park or common area where all generations connect in harmony).

Creation: Producing something new and original (e.g., not copying what's been done before but putting thoughts and creativity into something anew and never-done-before solution).

Duty: Responsibility to oneself, one's family, one's community (e.g., donating a talent to serve as a common good, working out, and being healthy).

Enlightenment: People love to get honest and fair information (e.g., let's not ignore the homeless problem, but let's understand the situation with honest facts).

Freedom: Living without unwanted constraints (e.g., the ability to walk through nature without fences; not needing to lock your doors).

Harmony: A balanced and pleasing relationship of parts to a whole (e.g., the way sidewalks interface with street cafes, shops, and traffic).

Justice: The assurance of equitable and unbiased treatment (e.g., there is something to enjoy for every age and interest group).

Oneness: A sense of unity with everyone around us (e.g., a large audience enjoying the same concert or beach, enjoying the sunset, or whale watching).

Redemption: Atonement or deliverance from past failures or decline (e.g., a cool retrofit of a run-down building).

Security: We want to be safe and free of worry about loss; in place design, this demands making people feel safe while still feeling free.

Truth: We are committed to honesty and integrity (e.g., we appreciate open design where we can see the kitchen of a restaurant or a community where the homeless are not hidden from view but integrated in just ways).

Validation: We recognize individuals and groups as worthy of *respect* (e.g., we position historic figures in our parks, honor certain people or events in street or venue names, or make special efforts to include children in the overall experience of a place).

Wonder: We are in awe of creation beyond one's understanding (e.g., we gaze at the pyramids in absolute amazement not quite understanding how its construction was possible, we take in the views of Venice from a gondola in complete awe of how the Venetians transformed a malaria-infested marshland, we arrive at a hotel and are flabbergasted by how the staff knew to stock the minibar with a favorite snack).

We have added Health and Wellbeing to this master list of meaningful experiences. Health is as important today as it has been for millennia. All traditional cultures have instinctively included elements of health and wellbeing into their everyday lives and in the design of their places—even if it has required removing unhealthy elements like malaria-infested swamps.

For example, an important piece in the success of Venice was an uninhabitable malaria-infested swamp. The genius of its local people drained it, developed suitable economies, architectural styles, navigation system, cultures, cuisine, and traditions that would have been impossible without health as the primary prerequisite. The point being, every culture requires some effort to adapt and transform to survive and strive!

What is important is that we cannot buy meaning. We cannot buy oneness, enlightenment, accomplishment, or wonder. These meaningful events happen within us. They give us goose bumps or make us gasp; they create the deepest fulfillment or take our breath away. What we have to ask ourselves as consultants, developers, and builders is, 'Does this place have the potential to elicit those meaningful events within people?'

Principle 4: Meaningful Experiences may be Transformative

The last of the guiding principles, personal transformation, is somewhat a combination of the first three, but significant enough to be described as a separate entity because it has the capability of taking any place to a uniquely distinguished level.

If experiences can be measured in terms of the memories they generate, some experiences have the potential to be more than just memories, they can elicit sustained change. Some environments can simply change the way you feel about yourself, the world, and the future. Attending a boot camp may leave you more physically and mentally fit, a semester at a university may leave you more educated, a visit to an *ashram* may leave you more enlightened.

Such personal transformations are most successful when the experience is complete, the environment authentic, and the touch points meaningful. Although we readily sell transformations in the form of tuition, travel, and membership, the actual value of a transformation cannot be bought—it happens within and through the person. What developers should focus on are those experiences that help individuals reach their personally transformative events, which will forever connect them to the venue. That is the truly priceless value of authentic place development, Xsense style.

The Methodology

These four core principles: the Experience, Authenticity, Meaning, and Transformation lie at the core of our work at Xsense along with common sense and intuition. We pull it all together through our unique methodology, a semi-structured way to understand what makes a place memorable, meaningful, and lasting. We supply deep research, publication, and meaningful interaction with the development team, local community, and subject experts. Experts can have small roles in the process, contributing to methodological oversight, or adding something completely new.

Deni—co-author of this paper—offered his own expertise in

mapping a community's 'sacred' spots so that they are built upon, rather than forgotten. Deni was also integral in the introduction of new methods in Xsense's already established methodology, including the use of pictures to elicit stories about people and their connections to places. In another project, he helped engage a large stakeholder group in a series of community charrettes.

Typically, a developer, operator, or landowner hires Xsense three or four months before the first design charrette when it is necessary to understand the roots of a place and the fruits of its tree. A team of anthropological researchers and subject experts use different research methods that often begin by skimming the internet and quickly graduate to meeting community members, stakeholders, more experts and, of course, the development team. We listen. We ask. We look. We photograph. We film. We read. We gather. We collect an amazing amount of information to understand the place, the people, the traditions, and how these traditions are expressed today. We ask: What is important to them? What are their fears? What are they excited about? What are the developer's dreams? What does the developer perceive as a negative? We often share our research with local community members and ask what's missing and sometimes we're told that soccer, rain, or a certain smell are incredibly important. We ask children, mothers, visiting grandparents, activists, artists, and healers. We read the slogans on cars, t-shirts, and lunch boxes; we meet the local craft people, bakers, and musicians.

Planners don't often have the privilege of spending more than a day on site to grasp the essence of place. At Xsense, we aim to bridge that gap by spending quality time with the locals. It gets personal. People take us to their grandmothers' houses in the middle of the jungle; we're invited to sit with shipwrecked historians living in the mountains and taste the food only a local can cook. We spend time with land owners and developers to understand their deeper motivations, dreams, ideas, and issues, and they often remark that no one ever spends this much time with them to really listen.

It is important that we take the time to do this research before we begin to interpret the data and turn it into creative acts. That process is reserved for a later phase and a larger group. Initially, we focus only on the roots and publish several iterations of our exploratory research until the development team is convinced we have grasped the most important elements (e.g., roots, to include statistics, population, weather, geography, biology, history, culture, legends, perceived "negatives," stakeholder opinions, and developer visions). The information is then assembled into an ever-expanding master document that we call an Exploration Book. The Exploration Book is a workbook that leaves plenty of room for notes and idea sketching—an important component of Xsense's unique visioning and implementation process. Before the first design charrette, all members of the charrette receive their books and are asked to read them and jot down or sketch ideas and thoughts inspired by the research.

The Xsense's work runs about 7-10% of a project's professional services budget or a mere 0.1% to 0.15% of the total development cost, an "almost insignificant amount in lieu of the overall value added and costs saved on any project," remarked Stephen Tindle, former project manager at Shea Homes.

And here is the beauty and value of what Xsense does: Say you are reading a chapter on the ubiquitous tree on the property, the Mesquite tree. The audience includes the developer, the land planner, the engineer, the architect, the interior designer, the marketing manager, the spa manager, the restaurant manager, and chosen individuals from the community. Although all of these individuals are reading the exact same chapter about the Mesquite tree, they will have fundamentally different ideas and find a variety of meanings as to how to use the Mesquite tree in the development because of their inevitable differences. The developer may think that these trees need to be cut down, the land planner may consider how to integrate them into the overall landscaping, the engineer may think "Mesquite Avenue" may be a great name for the central avenue, the architect may want to learn how the Mesquite tree survives in the desert and use bio-mimicry principles in the architectural design, the interior designer may look at design elements that feature the shiny pods of the Mesquite tree, the marketing manager may see the tree on a brochure, the spa manager may design a body scrub treatment using ground mesquite seeds, while the restaurant manager may create low-glycemic menu items baked with mesquite flour. The complex interweaving of different truths synthesized into the Experience Book helps us define the synthesized truths that help us define what makes the place interesting, compelling, and full of surprises.

During a series of visioning and design charrettes, the team discusses which roots are the most important and which may be secondary or just little "hairline" roots. As the roots finally connect into a tree trunk, the vision comes together. The team is now ready to apply the vision to the tree's branches, always carefully connecting the fruits back to its roots. This process may feel like extra work and extra time spent during these early phases, but our project teams often remark that a strong vision ultimately allows them to work faster down the line, establish stronger synergies with one another, and ultimately leads to fewer rework and change orders—and they have more fun. Teams particularly enjoy this process because it allows them to do what they do best: Create and collaborate to enable meaningful results (Figure 9).

You may imagine the Exploration Book morphing into an Exploration Guidebook, which explains every aspect of the development connected with meaning for a vastly diverse audience, but we invite you to imagine further the twisting of various meanings and stories into inventions that are entirely new, multifaceted, amazingly creative, and full of elements that define the place (in lieu of a marketing brochure). Welcome to a real place!



Figure 9: Uta in a design charrette in Dominical, Costa Rica. (Xsense Archives)

Case Studies: Stories of Authentic Places

Describing the wealth of research and discoveries Xsense has made over the years would fill many more pages than are available in this essay. Over the following pages, we highlight significant elements we have uncovered that defined the development of these projects. In some cases, these site elements were seen initially as constraints or as things to be removed or hidden to avoid interference with the development plans, but through our investigations, they became assets to each project.¹

The Story of Rocks and People

Setting: Resort-style community adjacent to historic Marsh House in Brentwood, CA.

Setting: Located at the foot of Mount Diablo with dramatic views at the site of the original end of the historic California Trail. 1,600 acres, 1,450 homes, clubhouse, trails, and vineyards.

Constraints: The site was covered with large boulders and rocks, which were being exploded as Uta first walked the site with the comment “We don’t need these rocks!” and “This is costing a fortune...” (Figure 10).

Background Situation: Brentwood had already decided the “theme” would be a Vineyard and the architectural style would be “Tuscan.” The developer also wanted to include the historic aspect of John Marsh, the original landowner and prominent California visionary, as well as the Native American Village on his property.

Roots: Xsense uncovered the hidden meaning of the local rock so that destruction not only stopped, but this local Mount Diablo granite found an honorable and meaningful place in the site design and cultural tradition. We discovered that the local

Miwok tribe cleverly used these stones for cooking and sweat lodges, and they worshipped Mount Diablo and its stones were sacred. We also researched the life and works of John Marsh and his wife, Abby, and his scholarly tradition as a Harvard graduate. We discovered that Marsh house was located at the end of the California Trail—the “immigration” route for many Americans into Mexican California (Figures 11 and 12).

Authenticity, Meaning, and Stories: Traditional customer touch points were connected cleverly to root stories. The result was that every interaction with such experiences had the potential to connect to a deep and meaningful core element of this land and its people.

The Spa: After discovering the word for rock in the Miwok language, the spa was named Sawā Spa, and featured rock and stone in its design, sauna, spa treatments, and retail items. A large warm “touchable” boulder became the focal point of the spa, which was another element that retold the story of the Miwok people.

The Warm Rock Tea Garden: During exploration, Xsense uncovered Abby Marsh’s tradition to invite the Miwok women for peppermint tea. In the landscape plan, peppermint was

Figure 10: Trilogy Vineyards, site with original rocks. (Xsense Archives)



Figure 11: Marsh House. (courtesy of the archives of Contra Costa County Historical Society, Martinez, CA)



¹ These and several other case studies (with full details) are available on our website www.xsenseauthenticplaces.com.

planted around rocks inviting visitors to sit, connect, chat, and enjoy peppermint tea. Through this ritual, the story of health and healing was rewoven into the development (Figure 13).

Hot Rock Cooking: Native Americans placed hot rocks into soup or other liquids to heat the liquid, as they had no pottery, which could be placed over a fire. This hot rock technique can be translated into modern tabletop hot-rock cooking in the restaurant, especially with the traditional steaks of the historic ranch.

Gifts & Retail: Hand-size rocks were cleverly engraved with the writings of John Marsh and family names for new home buyers, thus connecting new residents to the story of the Miwok, Mount Diablo, and the wisdom John Marsh brought to the area.

Street names: Naming is an important strategy in Xsense's storytelling approach. Names such as Sacred Mountain Lane, Healing Rock Court, and California Trail connect to the many stories of this unique place and contribute to the establishment of new authentic experiences.

Venue names: Club Los Meganos ties back to the original rancho name; Café d'Oro ties back to a legend of gold buried on the site (even officially mentioned in home sales contracts); Abby's Studio Kitchen, The Marsh Library, The Delta Athletic Club, and the Mount Diablo Ballroom remind us of elements of the history of John Marsh and his neighbors, which add depth and the potential to dive into the place's story (Figure 14).

"Uta and her Xsense team have been integral to the success of our Trilogy communities. This is particularly the case when we have brought them on board in the earliest, conceptual stages of our planning and design process. The world-class skillsets that Xsense offers, as an augmentation to our team's vision, have become fundamental to our success. Through their extensive research, creativity, and meticulous execution, Xsense has been invaluable in helping us establish not only a decisive competitive advantage, but also creating communities that feel right to our residents. The value-added ingredients that Xsense delivers, far beyond the 'bricks and mortar' of their home, give our residents a sense of belonging to a real community, in the true sense of the term. That was always our goal when we conceived the Trilogy concept and Xsense has helped us raise the bar on the delivery of our vision." Stephen Tindle – General Manager, Trilogy Vineyards, Shea Homes.

The All-American Story of Blue Denim

Setting: Casual resort-style community adjacent to Tracy, CA.

Site: Flat & windy with no particular views or ambiance; 1,400 acres, 1,200 homes, & golf course.

Background Situation: The developer was concerned that the site had no charm and that it was too windy and isolated. The project, however, had a name, "Mountain House," which could not be changed as it was part of the identity of the larger



Figure 12: John Marsh with Native Americans at Los Meganos Ranch, ca. 1850s. (courtesy of Contra Costa County Historical Society, Martinez, CA)



Figure 13: Abby's Rock Tea Garden. (courtesy of The Wallace Group)

Figure 14: Club Los Meganos, Trilogy. (courtesy of The Wallace Group)



community by the same name. The target market for this community was a culturally and generationally diverse group of people with various ethnic backgrounds: Middle East, Far East, South America, Asia, and North America.

Roots: Xsense began by searching for the roots of the name. There was no mountain in sight, so why would such a place be called Mountain House? Our research proved quite challenging. There was no record of a Mountain House online nor did the local museum have any information. Our persistent research led us to the house of a local writer who shared with us a chapter she had been writing on Mountain House and its identity over the centuries. The book was published 12 months later.

Thanks to our research, we discovered that Mountain House—located only four miles away as the crow flies—had a diverse history, beginning as a stagecoach and a place born to provide “real hospitality for man and beast” during California’s Gold Rush (Ann Marshall Homan’s *Historic Livermore, California*).

Figure 15: Mountain House today: a Harley hangout. (Xsense Archives)



Figure 16: Mountain House Clubhouse: as comfortable as your favorite pair of denims. (courtesy DTJ Design)



A biker hangout today, its original structure was a blue denim tent that was later replaced by an adobe building, and eventually re-built as a wooden structure—a sign of its adaptability to changing times. From shelter to restaurant, from a restful amusement to a biker’s pit stop, its use had also changed overtime (Figure 15). The denim tent finding was intriguing. Upon further research, we were fascinated to learn that Levi Strauss sold blue denim tents for about 20 years before getting into his much more lucrative apparel business. Another impelling story referred to its ownership by a German immigrant named Simon Zimmermann, a man who was known for his good humor, funny accent, and knack for hospitality. He also loved the wind! We located the great-great-granddaughter of Simon Zimmermann, Noreen Perschud, who was fascinated with our research and supplied us with historic anecdotes and artifacts, including samples of Simon’s handwriting and signature.

Authentic, Traditional, & Meaningful Experiences and Stories: The denim story uncovered during Xsense’s explorations is an authentic part of American History, yet unmistakably pan-ethnic. Around the world, denim has become a symbol of an honest and unpretentious fabric that easily adapts to every culture and generation, and we found it would be a good fit with the residents of Mountain House. Looking at the deeper meaning of denim, we discovered the origin of its name, which could be traced back to the city of Nîmes in France where the fabric was born and named “de Nîmes” (meaning “from Nîmes”), which eventually became denim. Xsense also discovered that it was traditionally woven with a neutral and colored thread, but that it was not always blue. The traditional indigo color, we found, was probably due to the availability of indigo dye in the region. Levi Strauss, a transplanted Bavarian, would easily have recognized in it a reference to the colors of the Bavarian blue and white flag, while Simon Zimmerman would have seen Prussian blue. In every way, blue denim became the thread that helped connect the past and present of Mountain House.

The experiences created as a result of Xsense’s exploration included the following:

The new Community Clubhouse was designed to feel like everyone’s favorite pair of blue denims, giving continuity to the traditional “real hospitality for man and beast” at the core of the story (Figure 16).

Following the tradition of worldly open-mindedness, the model homes took inspiration from local California architecture integrated to enticing design elements from around the world: Naan ovens, tatami rooms, meditation areas facing mecca, and Bavarian blue shutters. This approach tapped into the multicultural story of denim as a metaphor of the American melting pot.

Wind games and wind art became part of the landscape design and a basis for community events such as an annual kite festival, which connected the community to Simon Zimmerman’s love for the wind.

Color therapy, Aromatherapy, and pan-ethnic treatments were the basis for the spa, and they expanded on simple elements that are used on a global level and that can tell different local stories when combined with the essence of the place.

Pan-ethnic: community festivals, food traditions, design options, and the sales strategy took a decidedly pan-ethnic approach to celebrating not only the weaving of denim, but the weaving of culture as the core tradition of the place (Figure 14).

The new restaurant was named “Zimmermann’s,” thus, linking it to Mountain House and his unique kind of hospitality that translates into all ages and times.

The suggested spelling of Mountain House with the “i” of Nimes became a common conversation starter and allowed every employee and resident to link to the site’s historical narratives of blue denim, the denim tents, and the history of Mountain House.

“As Director of Community Design, responsible for the ‘vision’ of lifestyle architecture, site design, and landscape, I was impressed and intrigued by the personal connection and innovation that Uta and the Xsense team brought to our envisioning process. Through reconnaissance, insight, and inspiration, expressed in words, visuals, and mementos, Xsense guided the crafting of a relevant story of place through collaborative design. Our client will benefit from their unique ‘kit of ideas’ to better position and foster a distinctive ‘lifestyle culture’ for the community.”

Steven James, AIA – Principal, DTJ Design

The Story of Rain, Coffee, and Pura Vida

Setting: Residential and local community development with cultural and hospitality offerings.

Site: Eight miles of Costa Rican rainforest and Pacific beachfront.

Situation: Among the many unique elements that characterized this site was the copious rain, which the landowner perceived as a major point of weakness in this project. Indeed, the rain falls 70% of the year. This challenge became a focus in Xsense’s investigation.

Roots: During the Exploration phase, Xsense spent significant time researching all that could be done with rain and what it meant to the local community. During a typical downpour, Uta asked a group of locals how many words they had for rain. She explained how Eskimos have over one hundred words for snow; they must have many words for rain. A spirited and lively discussion led to a listing of wonderfully poetic names that described different rain conditions, from “Cat’s Fur” used to indicate a gentle drizzle to “the Sky is Coming Down” to describe torrential rains. There were about twelve equally beautiful descriptions that helped us understand how the locals engaged and connected with this fundamental element. The tradition of rain was evidently engrained in the culture

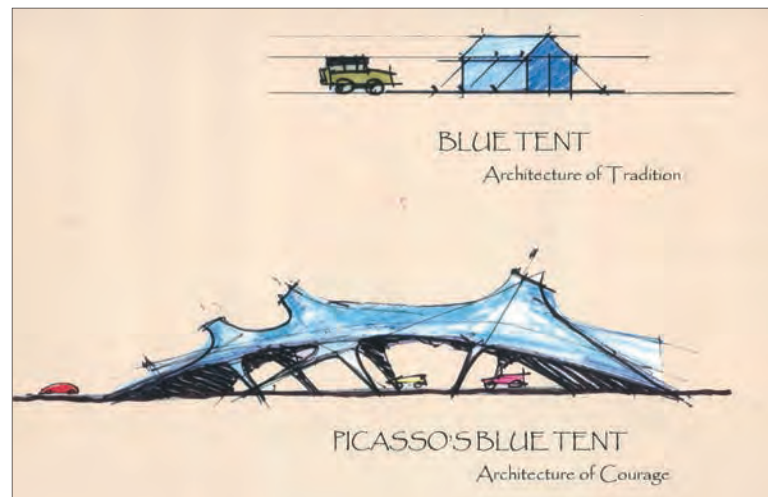


Figure 17: Mountain House's Blue tent reinterpretation.
(courtesy DTJ Design)

because there was no way to avoid it, so they embraced it with their beautiful language. The research team proceeded to study everything that could be done with rain, from rain music to rain dances.

The Exploration findings also revealed other important community landmarks, such as the traditional pulperia, a convenience-type store where one can buy anything, gossip, or meet a future spouse. The pulperia is also the place for dance lessons and to enjoy an incredible cup of Costa Rican coffee, nibble on pastries while relaxing in a traditional rocking chair, and engage in what they call Pura Vida, pure life or “the essence of life.”

Authenticity, Meaning, and Stories: As we often do, Xsense organized a community charrette to uncover the shared vision for the new town center design, which was to include a public square, a pulperia, and a café. During the charrette, residents discussed the rain and its related traditions.

We contemplated rain dancers entertaining the patrons in the café when the local engineer critiqued our euphoric discourse on water and rain, and reveal to us that, in reality, there was a water shortage, because water was never captured and filtered and simply ran down the mountain and into the ocean! After an initial quiet pause, our environmental engineer suggested creating beautiful water filters on top of people’s homes and the café so the water that the community so desperately needed could be filtered through an iconic architectural form. As we discussed the new architectural filters, local coffee aficionados informed us that different rainfalls had different pH levels and different coffees were better paired with certain types of water pH. A completely new and innovative concept emerged for the coffee shop: Water would be filtered ceremoniously into the center of the coffee shop and used to make specific kinds of coffee, thus, making coffee drinking a deeply meaningful



Figure 18: Pulperia in Palmar Sur, Costa Rica. (Xsense Archives)

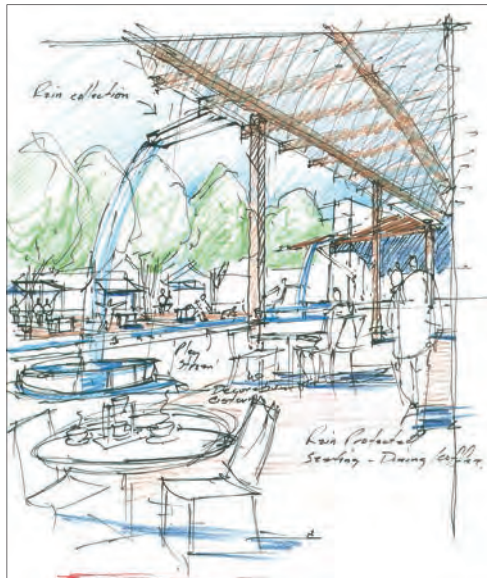


Figure 19: Rain architecture.
(courtesy Harmony Project)

Figure 20: Rain Dance Square. (courtesy Harmony Project)



experience that valued local tradition and added an element of ingenuity and wonder to connect a constraint to the local love for rain, coffee, Pura Vida, and sustainability (Figures 30, 31, 32). These insights also led the architects to design the plaza and buildings according to a new gestalt that said, "We own the rain."

"Few convert challenge to brilliant inspiration. For the decade I have known Uta in Asia, this was her routine. As a businesswoman immersed in masculine cultures, this is an additional achievement. Her perennial state of energy, self-challenge, innovation, and organization is the genesis of her Xsense genius. For Uta, the cliché is to practice what you preach and connect to culture in meaningful ways. Her efforts are exponential—with results that are anything but cliché." Bradford Zak – Founder, New Tourism & The Harmony Project

Authoring Many More Stories

Over the course of the years, Xsense has researched many stories and communities, from places grounded in family histories of smuggling, to utopian communities seeking to be reconnected to their original communal living values, to the a wonderful stretch of California coastline where we worked with descendants of the original Native American inhabitants seeking to re-root to the land of their ancestors and heal the site from its recent history of environmental degradation. Each story is unique, each place characteristic, and each exploration slightly different, which allows the authenticity of each place and its people to emerge. Throughout it all, we have brought together a range of skills, techniques, and knowledge, and have grown as individuals together with the stakeholders we have served. We have created value that, while hard to quantify at times, is evident in the success of the projects we have helped finalize, or the processes we have helped set into motion by putting into practice the four principles, which are worth reiterating here:

Principle 1: Experiences are Multi-Sensual

Principle 2: Authenticity is Found not Made

Principle 3: Meaning is Different for Everyone

Principle 4: Meaningful Experiences May be Transformative

Recommendations for Successful and Authentic Places

Legendary places are not created overnight; they grow and change with time. If we set out to add to the human spirit by creating new places, we must first tap into their roots to deeply understand the contexts and add to their souls by connecting to their authenticity: their physical form, meaningful traditions, and historical narrative. Authentic places cannot be themed or imposed top-down; they are the result of adaptation and change overtime. By tapping into the existing authenticity of a place, we can ensure that new development will be loved and, therefore, will be sustainable because all generations will find value and meaning they wish to keep alive. Most of

all, places are not only made of things, but consist of makers of experiences and may elicit meaningful transformations that can be an important added value to any project and to people's lives.

There is an art and science to finding roots and uncovering the traditions that nurture them with new vital lymph. There are people who appear to have a natural instinct for this type of work, and at Xsense, we take great care in selecting a culturally diverse group of individuals with an unparalleled ability to conduct deep research, read between the lines, and unveil meaningful information that can help connect past with present.

It is imperative to take as much time as you can possibly afford to understand a place, its people, its traditions, its challenges, and its many opportunities. The more time you spend up front, the deeper and more resilient the product. Probably one of the greatest downfalls is that developers neither carve out the budget nor the time for the type of investigation needed before the design clock can start ticking, or it may be that a planner's own research never gets passed on to the community or the rest of the team. Xsense's work not only delivers the inspiration needed for physical design, but it supplies a place and set of lived experiences far superior to any marketing story or theme. Our work is intended to give operational direction, human resource training, and a physical roadmap to help agents of change and development keep the place alive and interesting for future generations, and throughout inevitable adaptation phases. This requires the establishment of a culture of honoring the authentic roots of place. For larger projects, such as entire communities, we often recommend setting up a dedicated Experience Center, a place of learning and inspiration for future residents, visitors, local shopkeepers, restaurateurs, architects, and planners who can tap into this resource to ensure their local businesses are connected to the vital traditions and stories of the place.

To all of those engaged in the art of making places, I suggest a few questions to start. Are the places you aim to create connected to meaning, tradition, and social and environmental sustainability? Is it authentic? Does it mean anything? It is valuable? And, most of all, will it last?

Want to create a story? Don't just build one. Build on one. You think there's nothing there? There always is.



Figure 32: Pura Vida coffee break during the design charrette in Dominical. (Xsense Archives)