

# ***Materializing the Immaterial: The Ontological Orientations and Agendas of Two Houses -- Thoreau's Cabin on Walden Pond and Heidegger's Black Forest Hut***

Thomas Barrie, AIA

NC State University

[tom\\_barrie@ncsu.edu](mailto:tom_barrie@ncsu.edu)

<http://design.ncsu.edu/people/person/thomas-barrie>

## **Abstract**

This paper will discuss the domestic as a medium of ontological and spiritual orientations and expressions. In this context it will argue that domesticity in general, and the house specifically, have often served as a means of both self-exploration and communal expression that, similar to other artistic mediums, served to materialize what otherwise would not have found full expression. Two houses will be presented and the multiple contexts and motivations of their creators discussed: Henry David Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond and Martin Heidegger's Black Forest Hut. The writings of each will comprise part of the theoretical background of the paper, which will be expanded through the lens of the ontological and experiential aspects of phenomenology. The conclusion will argue that, even though the two houses were conceived and experienced according to different agendas, they shared the position that the simple dwelling possessed the capacity to embody and express a full range of ontological and spiritual issues.

## **Background**

The paper will introduce the subject through a review of other artists, philosophers and architects who chose the domestic as a means to materialize their philosophy and theories, including: Ludwig Wittgenstein's Norway cabin and the house he designed for his sister, Pablo Neruda's houses, and Carl Jung's house in Bollingen. These examples will be employed to illustrate the capacity and efficacy of the domestic to embody the immaterial and will be illustrated by their creator's writings and the range of interpretations that followed. All to demonstrate the potency of the artistic, architectural, theoretical, and philosophical capacity of the domestic, as well as the numerous and often-conflicting interpretations they have produced.

The discussion of the paper's case studies will expand on the themes of their author's intentions, expressions, and reflections, and the consequent interpretations of the work. It will challenge the predominant interpretations of each as private hermitages to suggest that they had broader and more generalized agendas. It will also distinguish the motivating factors and reflections of each. For example, Thoreau wrote explicitly and expressively about his self-built cabin on Walden Pond in his most well-known and influential work. Chapters such as "Economy" and "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," reveal the cabin at Walden as a demonstration project of sorts. Heidegger wrote little directly about his Black Forest Hut, though his reflections on Black Forest farmhouses and the essay "Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?" illustrate many of his goals in constructing his rural retreat. Both Thoreau and Heidegger present the potency of their retreats to authentically engage the world – in "Sounds" Thoreau describes the multi-sensual experiences engendered by its natural setting, and in a section of "Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?" Heidegger reflects on the reciprocal relationship between his philosophical explorations and the pastoral world that

surrounds him. In both cases there are allusions to the capacity of architecture, and in particular the simple cabin, to mediate between and access broader, ontological, phenomenological orientations and understandings, perhaps most eloquently expressed in the Parable of “The Artist of Kouroo” in the conclusion to *Walden*, and Heidegger’s reflections on the capacity of the domestic to productively disclose the immaterial world.