

Life Takes Place

Unpredictable and Marvelous

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... in this room there is stillness, and the stillness has gone tense. The room is waiting for something to happen. I could light the fire, but my friend forgot to leave me any logs. I could turn on a lamp, but there is no animal feeling in electricity. I stand up again and walk over to the phonograph and switch it on without changing the record that I played this morning. The music strengthens and moves about, catching the pictures, the books, and the discolored white marble mantelpiece as firelight might have done. Now the place is no longer a cave but a room with walls that listen in peace.

—Maeve Brennan, *Howard's Apartment*, "The Long-Winded Lady" November 11, 1967



Fig. 1. Central Illinois

YOU pack a small bag: khakis and jeans, sweater, t-shirts, socks. And a computer bag with cables, phone, a bunch of the small gifts you've been asked to bring, and the papers in your group; red Converse sneaks are on your feet. It takes three flights to reach Willard Airport in Savoy, Illinois—landing, the plane flies in low over big cornfields. The University of Illinois maintains conference facilities at a place called Allerton Park. A volunteer corrals you with the others who will shuttle with you to Allerton.

The drive out there takes forever—across nothing. Nothing. It's flat farmland—flat to every horizon line, wind sweeping across with hardly a hindrance. Sky filling every sightline so that even this autumn day harbors a tickling dread. From the side window it feels like being in the fields. The roads align on a grid; the towns at grid intersections. The place names are strange: Farmer City, Rantoul, Lake of the Woods, Philo, Tolono, White Heath, Tuscola, Mahomet, Arcola, Olney ("Home of the White Squirrels"), Mattoon, Pesotum—even a Foolsland.

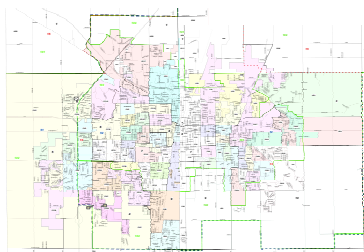


Fig. 2. Lay of the Land: Champaign-Urbana



Fig. 3. Seeds

Along the road are signs of a different kind of place. Seed signs—of all types.

No personal car; you're stuck here for four days and four nights in this emptiness of nowhere. You begin to regret the decision to come. You're not presenting a paper, that's not the point. You've submitted a draft—a "work-in-progress" they called it—and you were assigned a *shepherd* who helped you revise it; *then* the program committee looked at it. Backward. Your paper has been a bitch actually, you feel like you've been spinning your wheels. You've also been sent other drafts with instructions to read them and prepare for discussion. You haven't done it, figuring you can get away with a quick sideways glance at some point.



Fig. 4. Entrance to Allerton



Fig. 5. Allerton Mansion

Suddenly the prairie ends and you're in the woods. A small road takes you into Allerton Park and then to the Mansion. You load out, head inside, check in, get your room number.

You head to your room. Up the grand staircase and down a long hall that squeaks every step. The room is big, and it's not the Holiday Inn. You stand there. Just standing still. The big room, the crocheted bedspread, the bay window looking over a pond to a field, the light soft and calming. You relax. You like the room. You watch the oak leaves glisten.

You go down and read your email in the Gallery—a place the conference chair said was a place to hang. You hadn't signed up for the Bootcamp, but the Newcomer's Introduction in the library tells you the structure of the week. First up, games. You'd heard of corporate "icebreaker" games and thought them silly. These games are led by a nerd with a German accent. There's a big parachute. You crawl under it as instructed, fall flat. You and some others laugh at the goofiness; you have mud on your sweater—the only one you brought. Then tennis balls bouncing on the parachute while everyone around it holds its edge and flails the edge up and down. Then a game to learn peoples' names, and finally a Rain game to simulate a rain storm coming up then passing. Will anything serious ever happen?



Fig. 6. Sleeping Room



Fig. 7. Pond

What kind of conference is this?

⋮

Why are we *here*?

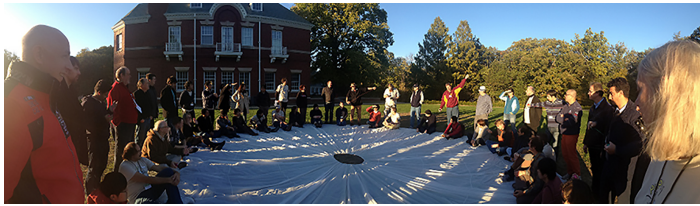


Fig. 8. Games

They said the pizzas would arrive at 6:30pm; they miss by an hour. Twenty Papa Del's deep dish pizzas. These pizzas are no joke. Two slices are a little too much. Most of the first-time attendees have never before seen pizza like this. There's beer, wine, sodas—that and the pizzas are served in the Solarium, a sort-of patio with a wall of doors and windows opening out to the pond and field beyond.



Fig. 9. Papa Del's Pizza



Fig. 10. Solarium

Off to bed. The program says breakfast is from 7:30 to 8:30 in the morning. It's mid-September and you leave some windows open and the air conditioner off. Every few minutes the world outside jumps silently, splashed with a flickering light, clouds illuminated from above, singular trees in snapshot: it is heat lightning at prairie's edge.



Fig. 11. Former Stables & Current Dining Room



MORNING and you walk down the grand staircase, down the hall, and into the former stables where a buffet line awaits. Grits, eggs over hard, sausage, bacon, flapjacks, cereal, biscuits & gravy, coffee, tea (in bags), and orange juice. All your meals will be here, including a banquet-style dinner on the last night of the conference. The table you choose is welcoming and talk is about the work and what people do. Some of these people will be in your workshop.



Fig. 12. Butternut Room



Fig. 13. Oak Room

Your group is assigned to the Butternut Room, a realm of books, warm wood, soft lights, a view to woodlands and the big field. You head for the leather couch beneath the windows; it's soft from years of use. Sitting next to you is the German you don't yet know at all, and, on the other side, a Swede from the parachute game. The last ones in have to drag a few chairs from the adjoining room. The facilitator goes over the writers' workshop method: *a writers' workshop*. Hmm. The author, whose paper is under discussion, must say nothing at all, remaining, like a fly on the wall, silent to listen attentively to the comments of those who have read and reflected on his draft. Now you see why reading and marking drafts beforehand is important.

Welcome to the *Pattern Languages of Programs Conference—PLoP*.



YOU'RE up early the next morning for a slow long walk. You like solitude, a pause, the timeout, space and time to clear your mind, to play back recent events and thoughts that came in the night. Allerton's grounds welcome long wanderings, both physical and mental. You head out to the north and happen on a vine-lined walkway; following it you stumble into the *Fu Dog Garden*—two rows of eleven blue ceramic Chinese Fu Dog sculptures which line up with the *House of the Golden Buddhas*.

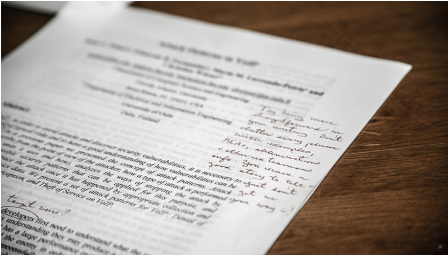


Fig. 14. Work of the Workshop



Fig. 15. Up Early



Fig. 16. Fu Dog Garden



Fig. 17. Fu Dog



Fig. 18. House of the Golden Buddhas



Fig. 19. Adam

Turning southwest you pass a gate house, the *Girl With a Scarf* sculpture, a sculpture of Adam, the *Chinese Maze Garden*, and the *Avenue of the Chinese Musicians*.

You stop here to look at the different musicians and their instruments. It is such a strange place. Weird, almost uncanny. This isn't a standard conference venue—it's not a convention center, a set of university classrooms (though it is part of a university), you're not staying at a Marriott or Hyatt, nor even the Pan Pacific in Vancouver.

You check your watch and there is time before breakfast.

Next you pass down and across the *Sunken Garden*. The Mansion has long disappeared from sight. The silence is eerie. No bird song. Your leg muscles are liking it; releasing the last tensions of the trip and the office.



Fig. 20. Girl with a Scarf

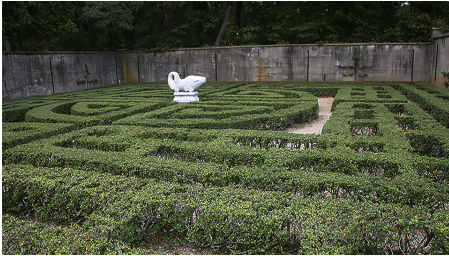


Fig. 21. Chinese Maze Garden



Fig. 22. Avenue of the Chinese Musicians



Fig. 23. Flute Player



Fig. 24. View from Sunken Garden



Fig. 25. Sunken Garden

After a good long stretch it gets frankly weird—the *Death of the Last Centaur*. This statue is far from everything, in a small clearing in a black walnut woodland. The statue is not beautiful. It's disturbing. The walnut trees have a peculiar scent. Some more wandering and you find the grand statue, the *Sun Singer*.



Fig. 26. Death of the Last Centaur



Fig. 27. Sun Singer



Fig. 28. Sun Singer!



Fig. 29. Sun Singer!!



Fig. 30. The PLoP Art School in the Dining Room

No one told you about the art school.



Imagine, instead, the conference in your basement

TIME for a session, so you grab a bagel, let the dog out, and go downstairs. You get on the site but forget to log on to it, so you can't find the Zoom links. On the Slack help channel you find what you need. Behind you in the laundry room your wife starts a load. You get in the room and see 49 in 7x7 gallery view—some with beaches behind, others with mountains, a TARDIS, the Enterprise bridge, but most with bookshelves, walls, and flags. Many with headphones or headsets, all on forced mute. The session chair introduces the first speaker. Behind you your wife yells for you to bring the towels down.

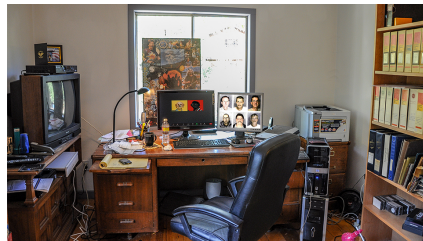


Fig. 31. The Conference in Your Basement

You snag a seltzer upstairs and return to the talk. The speaker's head is on the right and his slides on the left. He marches ahead looking—apparently—at his laptop. You put the session Slack channel on a screen next to you and watch it for comments and questions. Outside, you notice, one of the suet feeders is empty. The audio jerks and glitches, the speaker freezes. You are thrown out of the conference while failover commences. You turn off your video camera and your static avatar goes up. There are 141 people watching—you see that on the panel at the bottom. You need to watch the posted video of this talk later because it's going by too fast. After the talk the session chair selects questions from the Slack channel. The gallery view looks like a police photo array like you see on cop shows.

You go over to Gather Town and find a friend there who lives in Holland. Because you know her well, her video reminds you strongly of the person she is. You chat happily for half an hour. Back on Zoom, you see some cats up on desks.



Fig. 32. Your Friend in Holland, Walking Away



Fig. 33. Back on Zoom



YOUR paper is workshopped. For the first few minutes your face turns the color of a copper beech, but then you start to really listen. People see things you knew you put in your paper, but they see other things too. A turn of argument you believed to be obvious threw several totally off track. As promised, the moderator pauses to teach about pattern construction or linking patterns, or he probes one reader's half-thought, or he solicits the group for a bridge between thoughts. Slowly it dawns on you that your efforts at science reside a little less on a page of text and a little more in the groping forward of the conversation itself: the reader/listener is as much a partner in the story creation as you, the writer/speaker. Science is not and cannot be a final draft. As you listen, new thoughts begin to crop up, you see how to connect your work with other research which could make for a larger more robust topos, and you can see how to eliminate some of your awkward phrasing. This is a gift that the group has given you.



Fig. 34. Writers' Workshop



Fig. 35. Food Line



THE meals are sometimes bland midwest comfort food and sometimes inept stabs at faraway cuisines but are always convivial; the breaks are always ready; the art school and games are silly; you stumble upon the Gorilla; the Gallery and Solarium are often too loud. You move through the hours, the activities, the spaces, moments of quiet and disquiet, ease and unease, and your hard leather professional persona softens a bit. The other authors who appreciated your comments on their work give you one of the gifts they brought—a puzzle keychain, a FEUP pen, a Paris tin with one truffle, a card that says *Foosland Bar & Grill: Food & Bar*—and you give some of yours and plan to do better. Every night is a sleepful night.

On the way to the airport you pass the AgriGold signs and you think: *yeah, agri-gold.*



Fig. 36. AgriGold



HOME, you revise your paper. It’s published. You get another new idea.



PLOP was designed for Allerton. Here’s what happens when we replace place with a placeless place:

I could light the fire, but my friend forgot to leave me any logs. I could turn on a lamp, but there is no animal feeling in electricity. I switch on the phonograph without changing the record that I played this morning. The music strengthens and moves about.

—Maeve Brennan, *Howard’s Apartment minus place*



A ALLERTON PARK, ILLINOIS

Allerton Park in Monticello, Illinois, is part of the University of Illinois. Allerton Park was largely created by Robert Allerton—industrialist heir, artist, art collector, and garden designer. His tastes were a bit odd. Allerton Park encompasses about 1500 acres of woodland and gardens. When I (rpg) attended the University of Illinois from 1973–1975, I frequently visited Allerton. I gave my first technical talk there in 1974 (in the Solarium). Allerton Park is five miles from the center of Monticello, the closest town; it is 26 miles from Champaign.

Allerton Park is bisected by the Sangamon River. The manor or mansion is a 40-room (30,000 sq. ft.) home, originally called *The Farms*.

Construction of the house began on June 13, 1899, and was mostly finished about a year later. Construction of the supporting structures followed afterward: the stables, greenhouses, Gate House, and Brick Walled Garden. The style is Georgian-Revival.

Allerton Park presents quite a few peculiar circumstances to attendees of a Pattern Languages of Programs (PLOP) conference.

First the land: Allerton Park is a woodland park sitting in the middle of flat farmland.

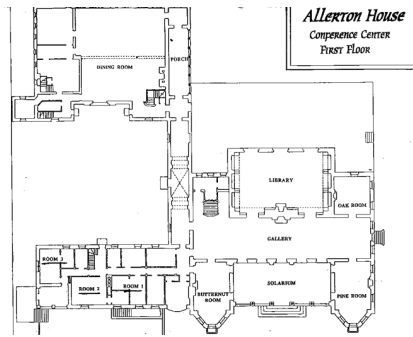


Fig. 37. Allerton Mansion First Floor

Next the strangeness: Allerton Park has a maze, a sunken garden, fake ancient Greek ruins, a fake Roman arena, and nude / bizarre statues—many on forested trails along the Sangamon River. Statues range from the quaint (Fu dogs, Chinese musicians, Bronze Woman) to the strange (*Death of the Last Centaur*, the *Sun Singer*) to the weird (*Gorilla Carrying Off a Woman*, *Bear and Man of the Stone Age*—a bear death-hugging a hunter who had stabbed the bear in the neck, the hunter still holding a rope attached to a bear cub).¹

Allerton Mansion and surrounding buildings are where the attendees sleep in rooms that are more like rooms in a private home than like those in a hotel. The stables have been converted into a kitchen and dining room, and attendees take all their meals in that dining room. The meeting rooms are modestly sized with somewhat worn furniture and in some cases extensive bookshelves and good natural light; seating is on padded chairs, armchairs, and sofas. There is a medium-sized library where plenaries are held as well as some workshops.

The grounds of Allerton Park contain a number of gardens: *Fu Dog Garden*, *Herb Garden*, *Brick Walled Garden*, *Triangle Parterre Garden*, *Peony Garden*, *Chinese Maze Garden*, *Annual Garden*, and *Sunken Garden*.



Fig. 38. Bronze Woman

¹These two bronze sculptures are by the French artist Emmanuel Frémiet (1824–1910), and were at times on display. Popularly called “Gorilla Carrying off a Woman” and “Bear and Man of the Stone Age” (formally, “Nicheur d’Oursons”), they depict violent encounters between animals and Stone Age people. They are very popular with visitors who enjoy being surprised by finding them in the woods along the Orange Trail.



Fig. 39. Bear and Man of the Stone Age



Fig. 40. Gorilla Carrying Off a Woman

*One comes away remembering certain small things,
haunted by oddities.*
–Joan Didion, “New Museum in Mexico”
Vogue 1965