

NATURE AND CITIES

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Presented at CNU 2000: The Politics of Place

CONGRESS
FOR THE
NEW
URBANISM

JUNE 16, 2000, 1:15 PM

I participated in the New Urbanism conference in Berkeley with some interest because, like many others, I'm very interested in alternative models of urban growth besides urban sprawl. But there are some environmental issues that don't seem to have surfaced in the debates I've heard. In this regard, I have three points to make.

The first has to do with unpredictability in natural systems, and the human propensity to control, or ignore them. How nature functions is inherently unpredictable, it's constantly adapting and changing in response to all manner of influences. Whether we're talking about fire, geophysical upheavals or fluctuating patterns in plant and animal populations, the unexpected is the only certainty. At the same time, the need for control underlies much of the design and planning agenda. In the fortuitous, anthropogenic landscapes of the city, for instance, the consequences of controlling nature almost always involves an impoverishment of natural diversity - what one might call environmental degradation by design.

There are persuasive parallels here with human communities. The so-called unplanned, chaotic and visually messy neighbourhoods one typically finds in older parts of the city, and which Jane Jacobs has so eloquently described, have evolved organically. They tend to become more socially and physically diverse and interesting over time when left alone.

For instance, when Grandma decides to move in with her family, a granny flat needs to be built over the garage, or when Dad needs to express his cultural roots, he'll use his garage roof or back yard for growing food or planting a grape arbor. If he's a conservationist, or a landscape architect, he may decide to plant a prairie garden out front. These are expressions of necessity, differences in values, and changing lifestyles, which is what healthy long lived neighbourhoods are all about.

The bylaws and ordinances that are imposed on most new suburban developments, like set backs, architectural standards, manicured lawns, fence heights etc., ensure conformity, and at the same time, tend to inhibit this natural social process from evolving the way it wants. In the multi-cultural neighbourhoods of North America, this is a particularly critical factor. Having said that, I also recognize that long lived communities may want to maintain design and social conformity. This was the case in Levittown during the first years of its life, and occurs in one form or another in most cities. In effect, livable neighbourhoods that have a sense of place may be initially established by socially sensitive design. Their sense of place, in an environmental sense occurs over time. In a social sense it's the consequence of long-term commitment by the people who live there.

The second point is about the role of local communities in the renewal of our cities. Citizen

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He is a Professor at the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University in Toronto, where he has taught since 1971. He is a frequent guest speaker at conferences and universities in Canada and abroad.

His books and publications include *Cities and Natural Process*, *Out of Place: Restoring Identity to the Regional Landscape*, and was a contributing editor to Royal Canadian Institute's new book *Special Places*.

organizations are having an increasingly important role in shaping urban form, and in initiating major restoration projects at local and regional scales. Over 10 years I've been helping one such group with the restoration of Toronto's Don River that is, or was, an environmental disgrace to the city.

Their purpose was to establish a long-term ecological and political vision for bringing the Don back to health, a process that is, of course, fraught with uncertainty. No one can predict changes to economic, political events, or changes in values.

The third point I want to make starts with a question. If unpredictability is a reality of nature, and human control is anti-nature, what useful role does the designer play in shaping urban form and enhancing quality of urban life? To answer this rhetorical question I would make four points:

a) A key principle is about doing as little as possible. The pressures to do the opposite often seems to be endemic to the design disciplines. Doing as *little* as possible involves the idea that the greatest diversity and identity in a place often comes from minimum intervention. This does not mean that planning and design are irrelevant, or unnecessary to a world that if left alone would take care of itself. It implies, rather, that the designer's role is to establish a framework within which change can occur, and where people can create the social and physical environments that they need and want .

b) In dealing with the design of the urban landscape, there's a need to dispense with the traditional "master plan".- this had it's day in the 1960s - and replace it with a "flexible strategy", i.e., a vision for the future that can be implemented incrementally. This was the approach we took with the Don river. (here's what we have, and here are the opportunities). The steps towards achieving the vision will modified and adapted in response to future conditions and events. The vision, therefore, has no finishing post, because, like the city around it, it's an organic entity in the process of constant adaptation.

(Two examples from the Don strategy. Goal: reconnect the river to the Lake. 1991 solution; 2000 same goal, very different solution)

c) Like any other kind of infrastructure, such as sewers and roads, Green Infrastructure Networks" have the potential for long life. As Kevin Lynch once said, broad site planning decisions, once in place, are hard to change. Green Networks become a multifunctional, local and regional, organizing framework for development that can evolve and changes over time. (redevelopment strategy for Toronto's Port Lands)

d) Mike Houck has said that urban planning has failed miserably at integrating the natural with the built environment. I agree with this, particularly where the "natural" should be the first step, not the last, in development agendas. But there's another factor It involves a recognition that ecological sustainability is, or should be, an inherent component of architecture and urban design. The alternative suburban model needs to embrace environmentally appropriate technologies, from energy systems and energy conservation technologies, to waste water treatment and recycling. Keeping away from river valleys, wetlands, and woodlots is not enough. Integrating the natural with the built environment is more than avoiding a problem, its about seizing opportunities to be environmentally proactive. Davis has been doing this for years, and I've never understood why this admirable model hasn't been repeated comprehensively elsewhere.