Green Infrastructure and the Spirit of Place

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While “advanced” societies tend to focus upon their technological prowess to construct infrastructure elements, such as roads, sewers and electrical grids; life has carried on for thousands of years and throughout most of the globe, without significant human “improvements”. This presentation will explore both natural and recent environmentally-friendly constructed environments that are intended to sustain a high quality of life for people. While biological, economic and recreational arguments are common for the promotion of natural and constructed infrastructure; this presentation intends to consider the spiritual component that might be found in Green Infrastructures.

Many cultures credit life-related spirits with inanimate objects, living organisms and places. In Judeo-Christian thought, the Creator God is the giver of life and performs this task as a spirit-wind (Genesis 1:2). In Genesis 2:7, of the Hebrew Scriptures, God forms inanimate dust; but life, and an opportunity for relationship, is gifted as a breath. While the Greek concept of “pneuma” may be most familiar to many as the life force or spirit of a person; pneuma was understood by the Greek Stoics as a force within earth, water, air, and fire, as well as plants and animals (Craig, 1998). The ancient belief concerning a guardian spirit of a place was known in Roman culture as “genius loci”. While it might affect the location of a temple, etc., respect for the genius loci was regard for an entity; but not the aesthetic character of a place. However, animistic characteristics can be found in totemistic and other world views around the world and throughout history (Ingold, 2000). While some world views reserve the indwelling of a spirit to be reserved for humanity; many cultures continue to respond to spirits that inhabit almost any type of object, whether organic or inorganic.

In the Eighteenth century, poet Alexander Pope (Mann, 1981) and others promoted the Spirit of a Place, or Genius Loci, as a way of appreciating the untouched landscape and influencing garden designers to consider the context of the existing, natural landscape; in contrast with applying whatever aesthetic fad or technique that might have been currently popular. This concept of analyzing and incorporating the character and elements of the existing landscape became an inspiration for garden designers of Pope’s day and the profession of landscape architecture, which was to bud in the United States in the coming century.

This presentation contends that the “Spirit of Place” is innately bound to the biology and physics of the site. Whether experiencing an animistic boulder, feeling the breeze that rouses a tree branch, or being enchanted by ducklings scampering behind their mother; our human psyche seems to find opportunities to deeply experience the natural environment (Relph, 1976). These encounters forms a relationship with the setting and its inhabiting personality or spirit to birth a sense of place. While some physical settings gain significance as enduring community or family gathering spots, others may captivate us in our initial experience as scenes of ecstasy, anguish, peace, reflective solitude, or hilarity. Very often our experiences are shallow and meaningless, as we are distracted; even though the place we inhabit may be animated by geophysical processes or teeming with life. No one world view secures this experience, because one does not need to believe in a place-bound deity to experience a sense of corporeal life that might permeate a natural setting. Even when we are consciously focused on our own lives, our subconscious may pick up on the “support” of the myriad life and life-supporting geophysical activity that surrounds

us in a natural setting (Relph, 1976). Community infrastructure, if planned for life and not sterility, provides an opportunity to support life and the "spirit" that life can offer to a geographical location or human constructions.

While the term "green" is sometimes used loosely to indicate that a product is environmentally friendly; Green Infrastructure, at its' core, should be about species biodiversity and ecologically healthy habitat. Benedict and McMahon (2006) define Green Infrastructure as "an interconnected network of natural areas and other open spaces that conserves natural ecosystem values and functions, sustains clean air and water, and provides a wide array of benefits to people and wildlife." They expand this definition by indicating that open and green space are emphasized and that this "natural life-support system…must be actively protected, managed, and in some cases restored" (2006). This management should support ecological balance that incorporates the broadest possible quantity of flora and fauna species and their populations for the given physical environment; or great biodiversity. If planned well, green infrastructure may handle community challenges such as storm water and air pollution, as well as provide an oasis for contemplation or physical exercise; but it indirectly benefits humanity as habitat for a wide variety of other creatures and plants. "Green" Infrastructures are pointless, if their intent is not to strengthen the existing biodiversity of the given environmental niche or geographic region.

In my experience working with regional planning, "quality of life" is a common, though nebulous, goal of citizens and community leaders. When residents answer surveys about "quality of life", beyond health care, employment opportunity and social interactions; many people are considering the overall character of their surroundings. However, fewer consider the detailed combinations of elements that create and sustain the quality they seek. These landscapes are types that inform our choices concerning "quality of life"; such as sparkling springs, pristine beaches, and uninhabited stretches of open woodland or pasture. But, many people are so alienated from the sources that support life in our chosen types of place that we often destroy our places by making ourselves as comfortable as possible in the pursuit of enjoying them. We build roads to our places. We dredge and drain around our places. We cut, fill and construct buildings in the midst of our places. Eventually, we may employ art and museum pieces to remind us about what the places once were (Fleming and von Tscharner, 1981); or we obliterate the place with intentions of preserving a more pristine place, nearby, that represents the type in our minds. We kill the "spirit" and the place disappears.

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