

Re-imagining Architectural Practice in the 21st Century: Our Way into the Future

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“All human professions, institutions, and activities must be integral with the earth as the primary self-nourishing, self-governing and self-fulfilling community. To integrate our human activities within this context is our way into the future.”¹ Thomas Berry

For me as an architect, and perhaps, for other ASCF practitioners and educators as well, the climate change emergency and its associated challenges represent an urgent existential crisis. The magnitude of the problem appears overwhelming and the solutions illusive because our imaginations and creativity have been constrained by an understanding of reality that persists in believing we can continue to produce buildings that support our destructive patterns of economic growth and consumption. And although the focus of our profession and education is beginning to shift towards addressing the climate emergency, I am concerned that the conversation remains insufficient to realize the transformational change necessary to bring about a viable future worth inheriting. I would suggest that before we attempt to find technological solutions from within the same worldview responsible for bringing us to this precipice, it will be necessary to establish new forms of cognition grounded in a new vision of reality, or as cultural historian Thomas Berry suggests, rooted in a new, functional cosmology before we are able to instill the hope, inclination, skills, and knowledge necessary to create a more balanced and mutually supportive relationship with the natural world.²

This paper presentation will explore potential sources of guidance to assist in cultivating the “ecological wisdom” required to bring about this urgent transformation of our profession, its related disciplines, and educators. To begin, Mark D. Hathaway provides us with a provisional definition of “ecological wisdom” as being “...rooted in a conscious experience of the interconnection and intrinsic value of all life. It consists of the diverse modalities of cognition and consciousness...together with the knowledge, skills, and emotional intelligence...that enable humans to discern and embody actions that respect and protect the diversity of life, live in harmony with each other and other species, move toward ever-greater justice and equity, protect the well-being of future generations, participate consciously in evolutionary processes, and find fulfillment and meaning in a functional cosmology.”³

I will draw inspiration from Thomas Berry, who perceives the universe as having a psychic-spiritual as well as a material-physical reality from the outset. Through empirical scientific observation, he asserts we have learned that during its 14 billion years of evolution, the universe has always propelled itself towards greater diversity or differentiation, greater subjectivity or interiority, and greater communion or interrelatedness.⁴ This process of cosmogenesis becomes the epic narrative that describes the basis for a new cosmology, one that recognizes the earth as a sacred reality and that has the power to inform and inspire us as architects to re-align our creative energies with those best suited to supporting life on the planet. I would suggest that we must allow ourselves to expand our empathetic

¹ Berry, Thomas. *The Dream of the Earth*. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990 p.212)

² Berry, Thomas. *Op. Cit.* (p.66)

³ Hathaway, M. *Cultivating Wisdom: Towards an Ecology of Transformation*. In S. Mickey, A. Robbert, & S. Kelly (Eds.), *The Variety of Integral Ecologies: Nature, Culture, and Knowledge in the Planetary Era*. (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2017 pp. 131-160)

⁴ Berry, Thomas. *Op. Cit.* (p.45)

horizon from one that is ego-centric or anthropocentric, towards one that is eco-centric or earth-centric. Design is a fundamentally worldview activity so it will be imperative that we forfeit human exceptionalism as an “a priori” value in favor of an eco-centric perspective that recognizes the earth’s needs as primary and those of the human community as derivative.

Perhaps as designers, if we choose to take time out from problem solving for a moment, and instead, engage all of our senses to be actively, empathetically attentive to the natural world, we will begin to re-align our thinking with nature, instead of against it. We might also begin to appreciate that the earth demonstrates itself to be the primary designer, the primary educator, and the primary revelatory experience of the divine. Hopefully, this alternate form of practice will move us towards “Metanoia” – a transformative change of heart and spiritual conversion that leads to letting go of destructive habits and attitudes, and instead, movement towards embracing the intrinsic value of all living beings along with the integrity of the diverse and complex ecosystems in which they exist.

Finally, I will share insights from transformative learning which, according to educator, Edmund O’Sullivan, “involves experiencing a deep structural shift that can help to reshape consciousness, feeling, thoughts, relationships, and actions. As such, it can dramatically and irreversibly alter our way of being in the world”.⁵

References

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⁵ O’Sullivan, E. The project and vision of transformative education: Integral transformative learning. In A. Morrell, M. O’Connor, & E. O’Sullivan (Eds.), *Expanding the boundaries of transformative learning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2002 pp. 1-12).