

Architecture of Love

by Nan Ellin

Adapted from *Good Urbanism* (Island Press), forthcoming November 2012.

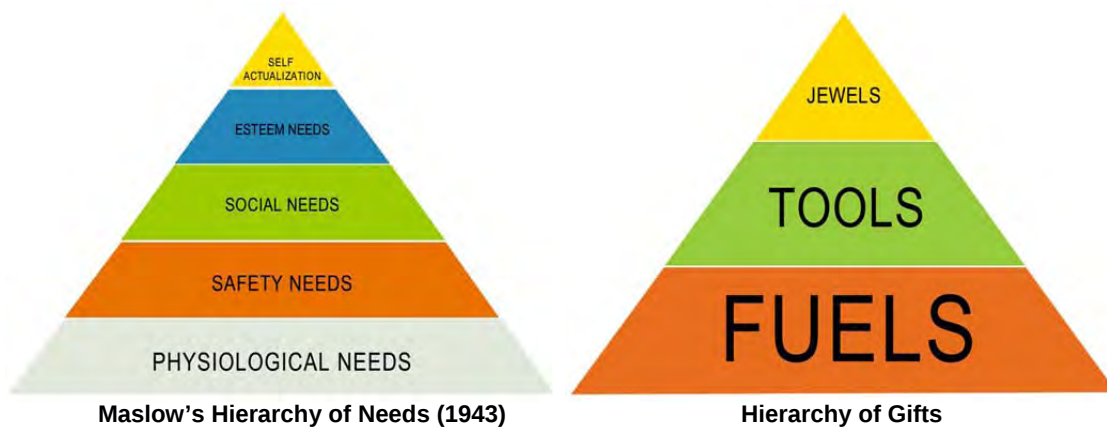
Do not reproduce in any manner without prior permission from Author and Island Press.

An architecture of love is ...

Gift-based

An architecture of love builds upon what is integral to people and locales – their *prima materia* or DNA. It enhances places by revealing and celebrating these existing gifts, rather than focus on deficits and problems. The gifts may include natural landscapes, buildings, neighborhoods, businesses, cultural institutions, history and cultural traditions, as well as the talents, ideas, and skills of stakeholders.

Hence, an architecture of love supplants the hierarchy of needs with a hierarchy of gifts:



Good communication (writing, speaking, etc.) about architecture similarly begins with an appreciation for what is working, thereby offering inspiration and instruction. In contrast, the modernist genre of criticism focuses on what is not working, typically offering cautionary tales about what not to do.

Complementary

Just as complementary medicine looks at the whole person including the physical environment, a complementary architecture looks at the whole environment, including people. Similar to complementary currencies – such as travel miles, time banking, and local currencies – an architecture of love complements what is already there rather than attempt to replace it, or compete with it. It protects what is valued, enhances what may be underperforming, and then builds upon this *tabula plena* (full slate), rather than presume a *tabula rasa* (erased slate).



California firm Bunch Design evocatively demonstrates the *tabula plena* sensibility with their proposition for Tree People. Reversing standard development practices, this provocation inserts human habitats into existing nature, so that development does not follow “the rule of an engineer’s curb but rather the guidance of the land” (Sundius and Ichiki 2011a).

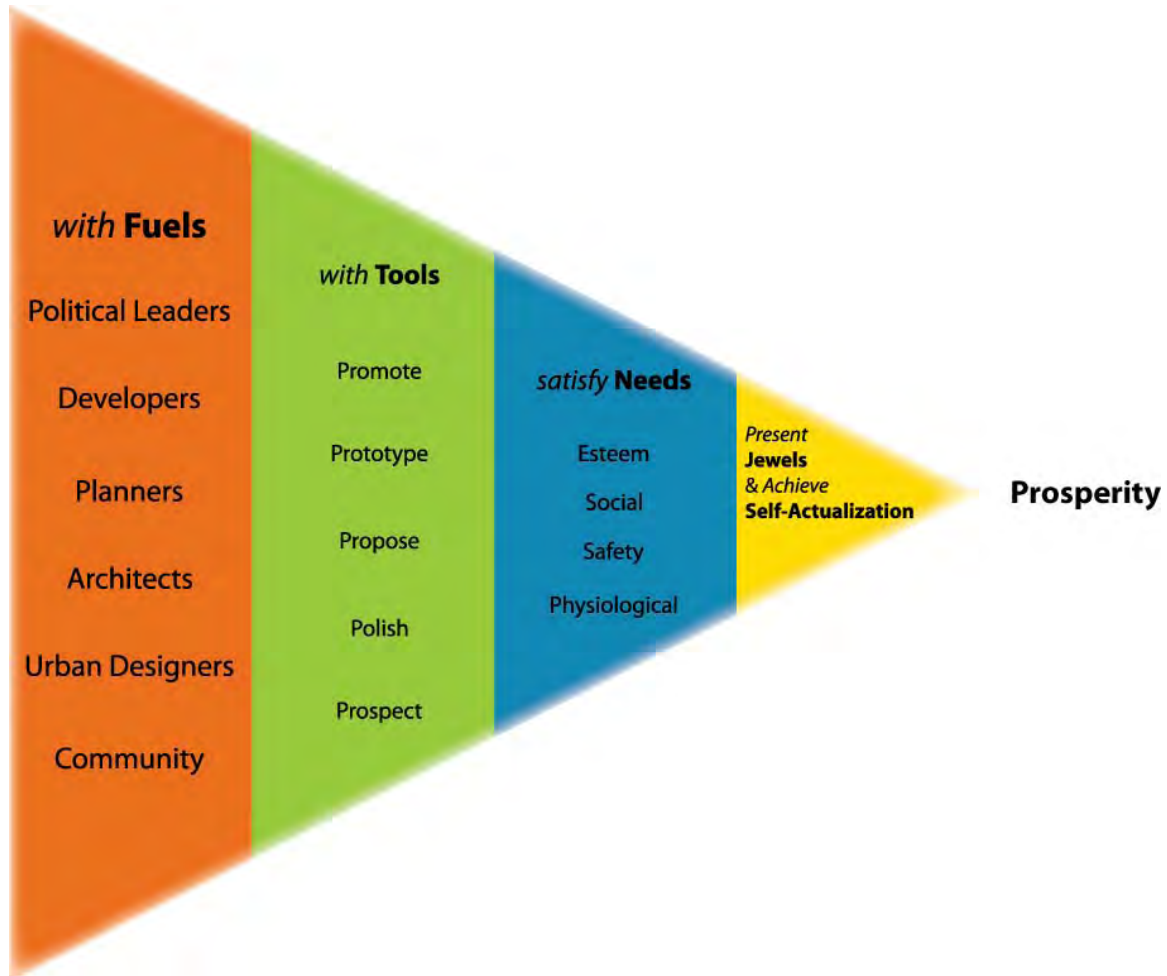


Inclusive and Sideways

An architecture of love is co-creative, inviting a wide range of professionals and stakeholders to participate, welcoming them when they do, and partnering to bring ideas to life.



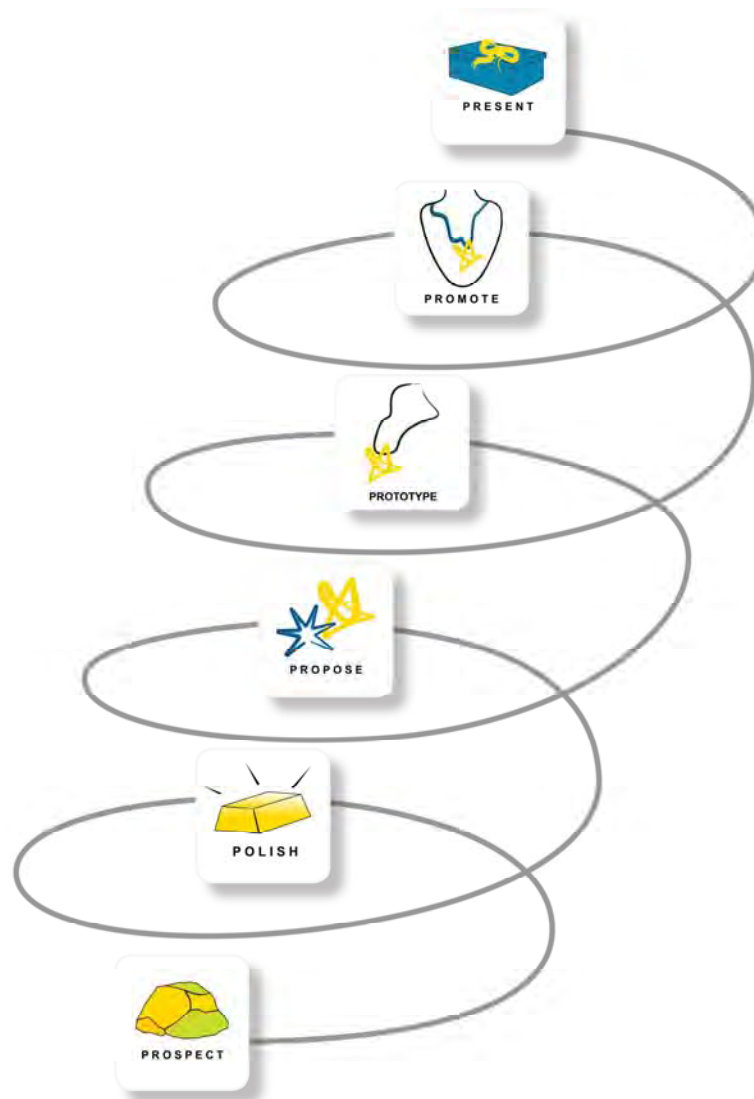
An architecture of love is not top-down, but nor is it bottom-up. It proceeds sideways, with segments of decision-makers, urban design professionals, and communities working together toward mutually-beneficial ends.



When community erodes, an “architecture of fear” occupies the void (Ellin 1997). An architecture of love fosters community by cultivating relationships through a process that builds mutually supportive networks of people.

Idealistic and Incremental

An architecture of love aims to create prosperous places where all people can live prosperous lives. It measures success in terms of such prosperity, rather than power, profit, and prestige. The Path toward Prosperity follows a virtuous spiral of six steps: Prospect, Polish, Propose, Prototype, Promote, and Present. It is an economy of gifts, beginning with gifts and ending with them.



Professional and Proactive

While inclusive, an architecture of love relies upon the expertise and experience of professional architects, urban designers, planners, and landscape architects – typically working in teams. In addition to providing technical skills, these professionals bring an understanding of which building traditions are appropriate for any given situation – the humanist, landscape ecology, systems, and/or form-making avant-garde. Often, an architecture of love blends several traditions innovatively, honoring them without mimicking them.

Slow, Low, Local, and In Flow

Placing a brake on rapid change and the havoc it can wreak, an architecture of love embraces **slowness**, coincident with the Slow City (<http://www.cittaslow.org>) and Slow Food (<http://www.slowfood.com>) movements. The most simple, elegant, and efficient solutions are often **low**-impact and low-tech, for instance, the use of swales, cisterns, and graywater instead of sewers and municipal water, along with urban agriculture replacing nonproductive right-of-ways, grass lawns and the purchase of produce from grocery stores. The mantra of the moment is grow, eat, shop, hire, incubate (ideas, technologies, and businesses), and generate (energy) **local**. Beginning with the DNA of places and people, an architecture of love finds existing **flows** and goes with them, and/or unblocks them to clear physical as well as social blockages.



A Process as well as a Product

An architecture of love describes both an approach to enhancing places for people and the resulting places. Those who practice it design the process, sharpening other tools of the trade and lending to a successful product. An architecture of love envisions best possibilities and rallies resources to realize them. It is not principally tactical, instead combining strategy with serendipity.

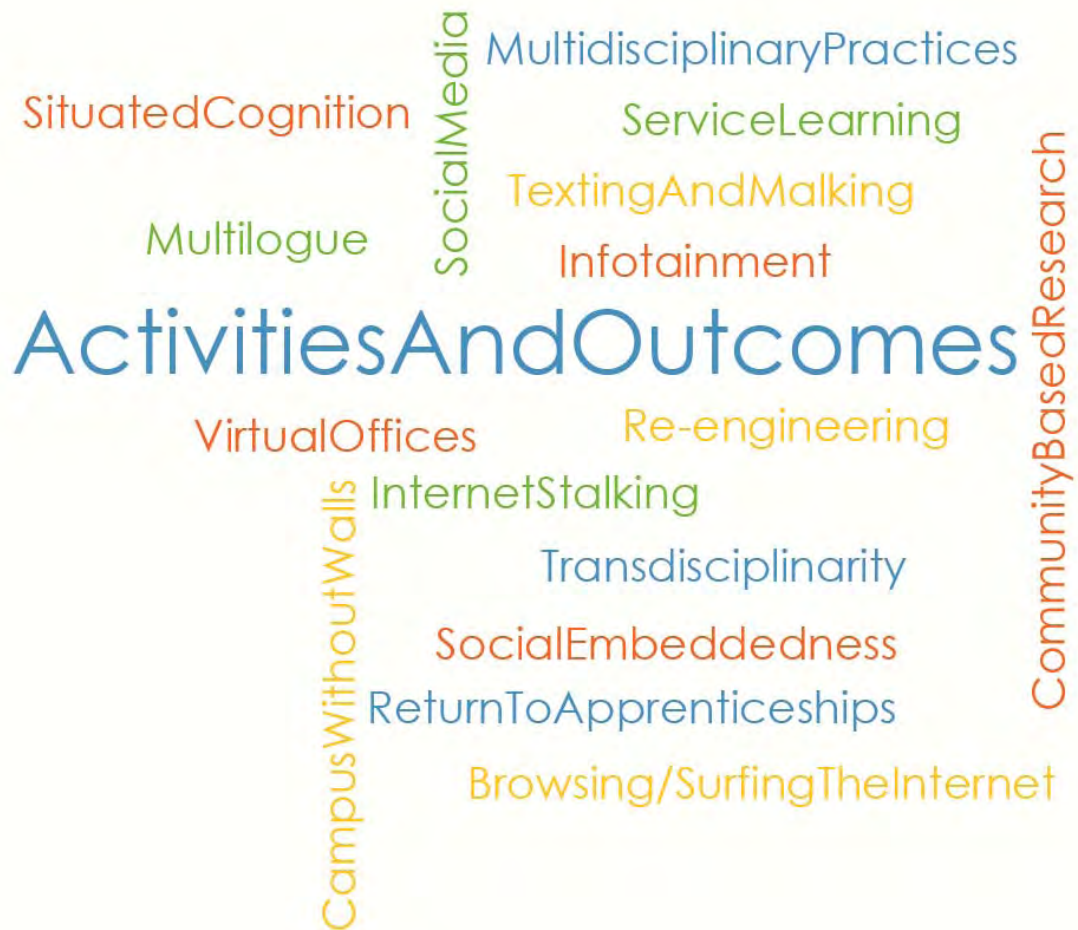
Generative and Integrative

The process as well as the product create synergies and efficiencies. An architecture of love sets a generative and dynamic self-adjusting feedback mechanism into motion, enabling clients and other stakeholders to build creatively upon their strengths in an ongoing fashion.

Part of a Worldwide Movement with No Name

The momentum currently gathering toward an architecture of love figures within what Paul Hawken described several years ago as a worldwide “movement with no name” that will prevail because it is not based on ideology, but on the identification of what is humane, behaving like an immune system (Hawken 2007) to heal social and urban malaise. Though it may have no name, some keywords and characteristics of this new paradigm are:

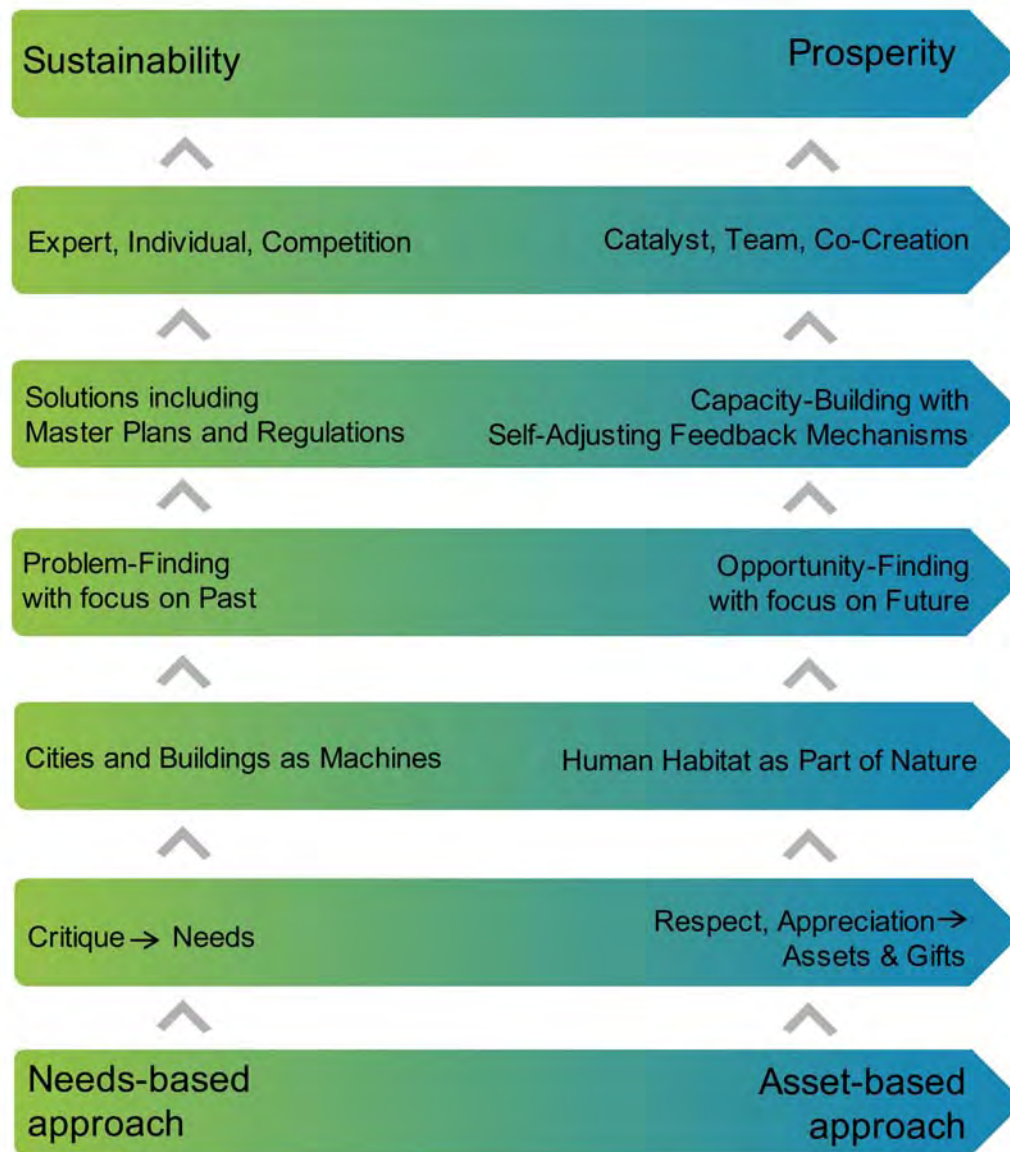






Transformative

An architecture of love can transmute problems into opportunities by revealing blessings that may be disguised and making virtue of necessity. Moving beyond sustainability to prosperity, it envisions and realizes better futures in a world that needs them now more than ever.



References

Ellin, Nan, ed. 1997. *Architecture of Fear*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Hawken, Paul. 2007. *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw it Coming*. New York: Viking Press.

Sundius, Bo, and Hisako Ichiki. 2011. "Bunch for Tree People". Provided by the architects.