

Culture, Environmental Action and Sustainability

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Hogrefe & Huber

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

is available via the Library of Congress Marc Database under the
LC Control Number 2003114186

National Library of Canada Cataloging in Publication Data

International Association for People-Environment Studies.

Conference (17th : 2002 : A Coruña, Spain)

Culture, environmental action and sustainability / edited by Ricardo García Mira, José Manuel Sabucedo Cameselle, José Romay Martínez.

Proceedings of the 17th International Association for People-Environment Studies Conference, held in A Coruña, Spain, July 23-27, 2002.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-88937-282-9

1. Sustainable development--Congresses. 2. Human ecology--Congresses.
3. Culture--Congresses. 4. Globalization--Environmental aspects--Congresses.
5. Globalization--Social aspects--Congresses. 6. Environmental quality--Congresses.
I. García Mira, Ricardo II. Sabucedo Cameselle, José Manuel III. Romay Martínez, José IV. Title.

GE3.I57 2002

333.7

C2003-906311-9

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PUBLISHING OFFICES

USA: Hogrefe & Huber Publishers, 875 Massachusetts Avenue, 7th Floor,
Cambridge, MA 02139

Phone (866) 823-4726, Fax (617) 354-6875, E-mail info@hhpub.com

Europe: Hogrefe & Huber Publishers, Rohnsweg 25, D-37085 Göttingen, Germany,
Phone +49 551 496090, Fax +49 551 49609-88, E-mail hh@hhpub.com

SALES & DISTRIBUTION

USA: Hogrefe & Huber Publishers, Customer Service Department,
30 Amberwood Parkway, Ashland, OH 44805,

Phone (800) 228-3749, Fax (419) 281-6883, E-mail custserv@hhpub.com

Europe: Hogrefe & Huber Publishers, Rohnsweg 25, D-37085 Göttingen, Germany,
Phone +49 551 496090, Fax +49 551 49609-88, E-mail hh@hhpub.com

OTHER OFFICES

Canada: Hogrefe & Huber Publishers, 1543 Bayview Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M4G 3B5

Switzerland: Hogrefe & Huber Publishers, Länggass-Strasse 76, CH-3000 Bern 9

COVER PHOTOGRAPH

Castro de Borneiro (Cabana, A Coruña, Spain). Photographed by A. Romero Masiá.

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Printed and bound in Germany

ISBN 0-88937-282-9

At home everywhere and nowhere:

Making place in the global village

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Abstract. A “quiet” revolution in architecture and urban planning has been taking place over the last decade, aiming to heal the wounds inflicted upon the landscape during the modern era. It is quiet because its practitioners are not united under a single banner and because their sensitivity to people and the environment often translates into design that does not call attention to itself. Nonetheless, its impact can not be overstated. Surfacing from all corners of the globe, this transnational revolution is dramatically reshaping our physical environment, the social life that occurs in it, and the practice of urban design. In this essay, Professor Nan Ellin describes this transformation focussing on five principle qualities – hybridity, connectivity, porosity, authenticity, and vulnerability. She also examines the larger social changes in which these qualities are emerging featuring a shift towards slowness, simplicity, sincerity, spirituality, and sustainability.

Keywords: globalization, postmodernism, ecological design, landscape urbanism

Since moving to the desert of the American southwest several years ago, I have been thinking a lot about the breakdown of traditional boundary markers. Boundaries between countries and ethnic groups; between central cities, their suburbs, and the countryside; between major world cities and the periphery; among professions, areas of knowledge, and much more, have been breaking down thanks to the end of the Cold War, the expansion of the European Community, the possibilities allowed by computer technologies, and the overall acceleration of global flows. All of these have made the world seem much smaller – a kind of global village.

Reaction

The speed and novelty of these changes have also generated a sense of emptiness, anxiety, and insecurity. Indeed, the words most commonly used to describe places today suggest an absence or aftermath such as placelessness, deterritorialization, translocality, and postcolonial. Some of the the adjectives most commonly used to describe space include: abandoned, blank, vacant, abstract, and anonymous.

Not surprisingly, we have felt nostalgic for the erstwhile clarity of the traditional boundary markers. During the 1970s and 1980s, this was apparent in the desire to retribalize or to assert cultural distinctions. It was apparent in the search for "roots" through the tracing of family lineages, resurrecting old customs, and even inventing "new" traditions. And it has been apparent in the retreat to ones' own kind: "We want to be with people like us" is the common refrain. Although American popular culture celebrates multiculturalism, certain trends suggest we are in fact becoming a more phobic and segregated society. Paradoxically, it is as we are achieving the modernist ideal of universalism that it has become unacceptable.

In anthropology, the study of cultural diversity, the modernist quest for an objective truth was manifest as an effort to scientifically study society, without imposing one's own viewpoint, to apply controls, develop hypotheses and come up with answers. The statistical average was sought – the norm – and exceptions were dismissed as irrelevant, uninteresting, or abnormal. People became factors in equations – the human factor – devoid of flesh, blood, and emotional complexity. By the 1970s, it became painfully obvious that this attempt to be an absent author only revealed an absent subject. One attitude held that we can not ever really know others, so don't even try. Retreat to your own backyard (and study your own kind) or inward (and study yourself). This attitude has been described as reflexivity, or more pejoratively, as navel-gazing.

Another reaction was to fictionalize one's accounts. What used to be a search for truth became an acknowledgment that there are many or no truths and that autobiography and fiction are all we can aspire towards. These tendencies in anthropology to retreat or escape are, needless to say, counter to its pursuit of better understanding those different from ourselves and thereby decreasing cultural conflicts, granted a modernist one.

In city building, the retreat and escapist reflexes have been apparent in segregated and defensive urbanism as well as theme-ing. The expansion of segregated communities is most blatant in the growth of retirement communities, like Sun City outside of Phoenix, but there are also many neighborhoods segregated by ethnicity and social class.

The impulse to retreat is epitomized by the growth of gated communities for all age and income levels, despite recent findings that gating communities has little effect on crime, either within the gates or outside them. This atavistic desire to mark one's turf with walls, gates, and prohibitions lends a new and eerie resonance to Max Weber's "iron cage" metaphor.

Outside of gated communities, security signage is ubiquitous. When designing new homes or renovating, safety features are of paramount importance. Sometimes, a client asks for an appearance that conveys a "don't-mess-with-me" attitude or which appears inconspicuous to conceal the residents' wealth. These have been described as stealth houses (Mike Davis's term). In the house he designed for actor Dennis Hopper in Venice, Brian Murphy set a bunker-like structure with a windowless corrugated metal facade behind a white picket fence mimicking those in the neighborhood. In a house around the corner

(the Dixon house on 5th Avenue, Venice), Murphy simply left the shell of the existing dilapidated house, built a new house inside it, and pre-graffitied the facade to fit into the surroundings.

Other houses take the opposite tack and elaborately appoint their entryway, perhaps in a show of intimidation. These houses assure protection through a variety of means such as sophisticated security systems, the posting of signs which warn trespassers not to enter or indicate "armed response," and so-called "security gardens," which group shrubs beneath windows and around yards specifically for the purpose of obstructing intruders. Architects whose clients live in Beverly Hills and Bel-Air report that one of the most often requested features is the "safe room," a "terrorist-proof security room" concealed in the houseplan and accessed by sliding panels and secret doors, reminiscent of a James Bond movie.

The mentality of fear among homeowners of all kinds has led to a pronounced anti-growth movement. People who do not want development to occur near them have been referred to as NIMBYs (not in my back yard) or as BANANAs (build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything). Such separatism offers a certain sense of security, but it also allows for more ignorance of others and less tolerance for difference. It feeds an us against them mentality and a tendency to defend one's borders, family, and self with gates as well as with guns (vigilantism). There are currently more than 200 million guns in private hands in the US [total population: 243 million] and over the last decade, the number of women with guns has doubled. Gun control versus the freedom to bear arms. (Amendment 2 of the US Constitution) is hotly debated around the country.

The popularity of the 4-wheel drive sports utility vehicle, especially in cities, also expresses a desire to defend oneself. Although equipped for off-road driving, very few actually ever leave the roads. The appeal of this sort of vehicle is epitomized by the current vogue for the Humvee (human military vehicle or high-mobility vehicle) which was recently released in a civilian edition called the Hummer, available for \$65,000 and up. Actor Arnold Schwarzenegger purchased the very first one (Rugoff). While the Hummer may be "the ultimate in body armor" (Rugoff), the safety of all cars today is a major selling point, including a wide range of options from alarms to car phones, built-in car seats for children, air bags, nonbreakable glass, and more. There are now microwave-activated security systems which, sensing that a body is near the car, emit a rough man's voice saying "Get away from this car or an alarm will go off in 5 seconds."

Our public spaces have been disappearing and those that remain often relay the message, Go away, or, Don't linger long, since they have been stripped of public rest rooms, telephones, and even water fountains. This barrel-vaulted bench was created for the city of Los Angeles to discourage people without homes from sleeping on them. It is called the "bum-proof bench." Not incidentally, since the 1980s, commissions for corporate buildings have been declining (because of an office glut in most parts of the country), while commissions for prisons, police substations, and homeless shelters have been growing. Also on the rise – and demonstrating the escapism into fantasy worlds – is the building of theme parks and of megastructures devoted to leisure and recreational activities, particularly sports stadiums and convention centers.

In the architecture and planning professions, the escapist reflex has been apparent in the call, since the 60s, to refer to cities of the past, described as regionalism, historicism, neo-traditionalism, or the New Urbanism. The threat to previously clear boundaries has incited an anxious effort to produce places that mask what is going on behind the facades and that look as though they grew spontaneously over time without planning.

The escapist nature of all these undertakings – behind gates or prison bars, away from our downtowns, into the past, other places, or fantasy worlds – may emit signals that the present is indeed unsavory. The rising tide of fear has led people to stay at home more. Activities that once occurred outside the home are increasingly satisfied now inside the home with the television or computer. Or if we go out, in the strictly controlled settings of the shopping mall, theme park, or sports arena. We no longer go out to mingle with the anonymous urban crowd in the hope of some new unexpected experience or encounter, a characterizing feature of earlier urban life. Unexpected experiences and encounters are precisely what we do not want. We go out for specific purposes, with specific destinations in mind, and with a knowledge of where we will park and whom shall meet.

But these retreat and escape reflexes provide only temporary relief from the crises in society, in the urban design professions, and in the built environment. And not part of the solution, they contribute to the problem.

The predominant urban design reflexes of the 70s and 80s – historicism, regionalism, theme-ing, and defensive urbanism – were attempts to rekindle a sense of community and with it a sense of security and meaning as well as interest. Although this postmodern urbanism has offered certain correctives to the modern urbanism that preceded it, it failed to sufficiently satisfy these persistent longings, and in many instances, deeply intensified them.

Proaction

The failure of postmodern urbanism has led to a reconsideration of values, goals, and means of achieving them, especially marked over the last decade. In contrast to the fast-paced more is more mentality, the appeals of simplicity, slowness, spirituality, and sincerity are clearly on the rise. Instead of responding reactively to rapid change through escapist and distilling strategies, there have been efforts to embrace, steward, or partner with (rather than control or manage) it.

The modernist quest for objective truth compelled creators and their interpreters to model themselves after scientists and engineers. In architecture and urban planning, this was manifest in the emulation of the machine, the quest for efficiency, and the desire to produce universal plans. But the disappointing outcome there, as well as in parallel efforts in the social sciences and humanities (described above), incited attempts to bring the author back and thereby breathe life back into all these endeavors. In the process, the guiding metaphor shifted from the machine to the collage or the text (story, narrative).

In architecture and planning, the goal became that of creating legible, meaningful, and sacred places (placemaking), in contrast to the anonymous rational spaces that were a product of the post-war period. These metaphors dominated the decades of the 1970s and 80s.

More recently, however, the metaphors for city and culture have been shifting once again. Like the collage and text, these emerging metaphors also suggest an inclusivity. But this time, it is no longer for the sake of inclusivity itself. Rather, there is attention paid towards whole-ness, a more calculated beauty, a smoothness, a lightness (lack of heaviness), and a strong sense of connectedness. In this spirit, these emerging metaphors are also more than metaphors, carrying literal and place-derived meanings as well.

The most overarching of the current metaphors is *ecology*. Architects and planners

are increasingly seeking inspiration for their work in "nature's deep interconnections" (Van der Ryn & Cowan, 1996)¹ while anthropologists and cultural theorists are increasingly regarding culture as a part of nature rather than in opposition to it. Cultural theorist Catherine Roach, for example, argues "against the idea that nature and culture are dualistic and opposing concepts," suggesting that this idea is "environmentally unsound and [needs] to be biodegraded, or rendered less harmful to the environment" (1996, p. 53).

While these understandings of connected-ness have many precedents, there is something qualitatively different this time around in the emphasis on change as a constant and on the reconfiguration of space and time due to digitalization.

The other prevalent metaphor for city and culture is the *border* or *edge*. Current buzz-phrases amongst anthropologists, cultural theorists, architects, and urban planners include border cultures, borderlands, edge conditions, edge cities, and cities on the edge. Clearly, the current fascination with borders and edges is another response to the dissolution of traditional markers discussed earlier, but now it is proactive not reactive. It is along these borders that our greatest dilemmas reside as well as our greatest opportunities for resolving them.

Amongst architects and planners, there is a great deal of attention paid towards the borders and edges in both their literal and figurative manifestations. Theory and practice have been focussing on places which are betwixt and between, places which are perceived as somehow liminal in space and/or time. This is apparent in the obsession with spaces considered interstitial, "terrain vagues," "no man's lands," or "ghost wards" (Mitchell Schwarzer). It is also apparent in the attention towards designing along national borders and between ecologically-differentiated areas such as along waterfronts and coastlines and towards preserving or creating edges between city and countryside (e.g., Daniel Libeskind's 1987 City Edge project for Berlin, Steven Holl's 1991 proposal for creating edges on urban peripheries in an effort to counter sprawl, the Banlieues '89 project in France).

The notion that the talents and energies of architects and urban planners should contribute to mending seams, not tearing them asunder, to healing the world, not to salting its wounds, has grown much more widespread in acceptance.

Another – although very different – expression of interest in borders/edges is the obsession with the "fold" (via Gilles Deleuze) amongst the contemporary Eisenman School. "Unlike the space of classical vision," Peter Eisenman contends, "the idea of folded space denies framing in favor of a temporal modulation" (Eisenman, 1992). Given "the exhaustion of collage as the prevailing paradigm of architectural heterogeneity," architectural theorist Jeffrey Kipnis suggests that "folding holds out the possibility of generating field organisations that negotiate between the infinite homogeneity of the grid and the hierarchical heterogeneity of finite geometric patterns" (Kipnis). In cooking, Greg Lynn explains, a "folded mixture is neither homogenous, like whipped cream, nor fragmented, like chopped nuts, but smooth and heterogenous." Likewise, he sees "pliant systems" in architecture as an opportunity to "neither repress the complex relations of differences with fixed points of resolution nor arrest them in contradictions, but

¹ James Wines, John Todd, and others share this view which has evolved from the earlier discussions of Aldo Leopold (1949), Ian McHarg (1968), Gregory Bateson (Ecology of Mind), Charles and Ray Eames (powers of 10), E.F. Schumacher (1973), Ivan Illich, Murray Bookchin, and others. It is also an extension of Jane Jacob's 1961 understanding of the city as a "problem of organized complexity" and Robert Venturi's 1966 discussion of complexity.

sustain them through flexible, unpredicted, local connections" (Lynn), practices which are "capable of bending rather than breaking." (ibid.). Charles Jencks describes this process as "enfolding," connecting that which is different by smooth transitions to reach a reconciliation, not a resolution.

In anthropology and cultural studies, the border has become significant as a place (again geographic as well as conceptual) where people engage in defining and re-defining themselves and others. As global flows have accelerated, there has been a perceived need to negotiate one's identity on a virtually continual basis, and perhaps in a chameleon-like fashion, with different identities surfacing depending on the circumstances. While posing a potential threat to individual and group identity, this condition also presents an opportunity for less prescriptive groupings. The anthropologist Renato Rosaldo speaks of "border crossings" as the "sites of creative cultural production" where interconnections take place (1989, p. 208).

Part of the appeal of *ecology* and of *borders/edges* is their ability to adapt creatively to change, their inherent flexibility. As these new metaphors suggest, the celebration of diversity persists but no longer for its own sake. Rather, there is an emphasis on what happens when diverse regions, peoples, styles, technologies, and so forth, collide or merge. And on what should happen. The timidity characterizing much postmodern commentary is being gradually eclipsed by bolder personal positions and polemics which recognize that excessive striving for evenhandedness and thoroughness ultimately allows the market to hold sway.

After centuries of increasingly dividing labor; cataloguing things and knowledge; segregating the landscape according to function as well as social class, age, and ethnicity; objectifying nature and people and fetishizing objects; we are now witnessing concerted efforts to de-alienate by bringing it all back together, albeit in a new way. The question is no longer whether or not to grow or to apply new technologies but how best to accomplish these. Some of the manifold ways in which this re-integration is apparent are a shift back from monoculture to polyculture and from functional zoning to mixed use; massive restructurings of the labor force (initiated from above as well as below); re-envisioning the purpose and structure of museums, schools, libraries, and zoos; an increased public role in local politics, in urban development, and in what we consume from food, to goods, advertising, and information; and in new collaborations amongst professions and between professions and academia.

While simplicity is sought, it is not the pared down "form follows function" of modernism. From "less is more," the goal might now be described as "more from less,"² after scenic detours through "less is a bore" and "more is more." The difference is in the inspiration (not platonic forms and geometry, but nature, the vernacular, the mundane, the "everyday") and the goal (not universality or nostalgia, but a critical regionalism or appropriate modernity). The resultant product is therefore also different, not a generic machine for living, nor an escape from the present into the past or from reality into fiction or virtual reality, nor a surrender to market forces. Rather, it is a place which sustains the environment including the people who use it. From the modern "form follows function" to the postmodern "form follows fiction, fear, finesse, and finance," perhaps now "form follows desire,"³ symbolic and sensual as well as programmatic.

² Ian Ritchie 1994 (Well)Connected Architecture pp.70-3, London: Academy Editions, excerpted in Jencks and Kropf

Rather than respond to specific problems with piecemeal solutions that only exacerbate the problems or push them elsewhere (reactive solutions), the emphasis on holism and seeing or forging connections at a higher and more complex level is leading to some more proactive responses. As our connections to the environment and other people grow increasingly tenuous – a condition commonly described as the breakdown in community and the family as well as the ecological crisis – efforts to re-think urban design have been seeking to resurrect such connections or to provide spaces which allow them to occur and to flourish. Some examples include the emphasis on bioregions and on world congresses to protect the environment [ecological crisis can be incentive for peace], the growth in metropolitan governments on a regional scale, increased consideration of culture in discussions about contextualism and (critical) regionalism, public discussions about “smart growth” and the creation of quality public spaces and public transit systems, urban infill projects and adaptive reuse, the revitalization of central cities and of public housing projects, the building of transit-oriented developments, and the exponential growth of neighborhood associations and community gardens along with the important establishment of community land trusts.

Perhaps we have reached a place where the question of whether to continue or abandon the modern project has become moot. Our hyper-rational embrace of computer technologies along with the simultaneous revalorization of simplicity, slowness, spirituality, and sincerity may be conspiring to eradicate the either/or proposition. This is because now we are doing both simultaneously, each providing feedback for and adjusting the other accordingly. We know we will never return to a pre-industrial integration, but the possibility of integration at another level now appears within our reach.

Conclusion

The sense that we are poised on a threshold is widespread. Over the last decade, economist Francis Fukuyama intoned the end of history (1989, 1992), philosopher Rorty the end of philosophy, Arthur Danto the end of art, Lukacs the end of the modern age (1993), Jean Baudrillard⁴ and Homi Bhabha the end of modernity, Peter Eisenman the end of humanism (the classical), Peter Blake the end of cities (1982), Richard Ingersoll the end of suburbia (1992), and Michael Sorkin the end of public space (1992). Others have described the end of utopia, of taboos, affluence, intelligent writing, religion, comedy, libraries, law, art theory, beauty, conversation, sex (due to sexually transmitted viruses or to cybersex), and desire (all cited by Murphy, 1992, p. 79). Some of these declarations are clearly despairing while others are hopeful; others simply mark a departure, the destination of which is as yet uncertain.

³ This phrase is suggested by Ritchie, 1994. Perhaps lending confirmation was the ACSA/AIA Teachers' seminar of June 1998 at Cranbrook Academy of Art which scheduled six workshops: The Desire to Imagine, The Desire to Democratize, The Desire to Connect, The Desire to Amplify the Body/The Body Electronic [cyborgs], The Desire to Proliferate Information, The Desire to Control Chaos vs. Promotion of Heterotopia.

⁴ According to Baudrillard (1982), modernity was an “aesthetic of rupture,” of the “destruction of traditional forms” and of the authority and legitimacy of previous models of fashion, sexuality and social behavior. But because of this, modernity lost “little by little all its substantial value, all moral and philosophical ideology of progress which sustained it at the beginning, and becomes an aesthetic of change and for change ... ultimately, becoming purely and simply fashion, which means the end of modernity” (1982).

We are at a crossroads. Not because of some arbitrary year number, but because of a general awareness that things have reached crisis proportions in our natural and built environments. The United Nations Environmental Program reports that we have about a ten-year window to turn the tide and achieve environmental sustainability, or we will descend into economic and physical decline. We now face the task of intervening in a way that nurtures the communities and the environment which ultimately sustain us. I am feeling optimistic these days since promising examples are much easier to find today than they were just one decade ago. With continued vision, diligence, and a bit of luck and goodwill, what is now a ray of hope just beginning to pierce the cloud cover may expand into a veritable sunburst.

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