

Nan Ellin: 'Place healer'

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Nan Ellin's official title at Arizona State University — planning program director and associate professor in the School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning — is a mouthful. But Ellin uses a much simpler term to describe what she does: "place healer."

"Doctors are dedicated to healing people," explains Ellin, whose father is a general practitioner, "and urbanists are dedicated to healing places."



Growing up in suburban Baltimore in the 1960s, Ellin spent much of her time playing outside, in an area called simply "the woods."

"There was a beautiful stream and these incredible complete wild woods with a mountain and a cliff where we could climb. Nature was really important growing up."

Then, Ellin says, in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, she watched as the area was converted to housing.

"We were seeing really bad decisions made all over the U.S., and environmental devastation" — what Ellin considers "a wound in the built landscape."

Today, Ellin says, "what I do is about healing the places we live in order to provide environments in which we can thrive physically, emotionally and spiritually. It really comes back to us and our health."

The author of several books on urban landscapes, including "Integral Urbanism," "Postmodern Urbanism" and "The Architecture of Fear," Ellin holds an M.A., M.Phil. and Ph.D. from Columbia University. After teaching around the country, including at New York University and the University of Southern California, she came to ASU in 1998, and she says that she has put down roots in the Phoenix area. One of the problems here, she says, is that many other residents haven't.

"There's a lot of transience here, people come from somewhere else, their heart is somewhere else, they think they might not be here that long. When people don't feel attached to a place, they're not going to put money into it."

Ellin says the answer to the question of what gives people a sense of attachment to a place is two-fold: First is urban vitality, a sense of what she calls hustle

and bustle, and second is some kind of exquisite nature. "We have the nature," Ellin says. "We just don't have the urban vitality."

Ellin's most recent project is Canalscape, a proposal to create vital urban hubs throughout metropolitan Phoenix where canals meet major streets.

"We don't really want to have one huge hub in Phoenix," Ellin explains. "That doesn't correspond to the DNA here." Because when it comes to healing a place, Ellin says, "it's like a person. If you're going to make an infusion into Phoenix, you need to know what's appropriate to this place."

Canalscape, she says, is "sustainable and authentic desert urbanism."

"We want these distributed urban hubs. That would make people's lives a lot better. It would improve the image of the region, and I think it would improve people's sense of connection to it and their giving to it, whether it's resources or time."

Ellin was raised Conservative, and she says that what she learned at synagogue as a child about *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam* — repairing the world — informs her work today. She was particularly taken with "the notion that God didn't make everything perfect here. He made wheat but he didn't make bread, so that we can co-create."

"I believe strongly in co-creation," she says. "That's part of the point of being human — continuing the work of creation."



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To learn more about the canalscape project, visit canalscape.asu.edu.