

A Doctrine of Sustainability

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There are at least seven First Principles that must be attended in all design programs, if we really are to sustain the ability for next generations to have at least as many choices for free, clean, and healthful living as we have. A principle is a statement with which no one among those interested in or accountable for a design and its construction [colloquium] would disagree. Each specific design program or circumstance will have additional governing First Principles, which must be discovered by and institutionalized by the colloquium if we are to imagine that our engagement with the land is to be sustainable.

1. THE EXTENT TO WHICH EACH GENERATION HAS THE **FREEDOM** TO DRAW UPON PERSPECTIVE, OBSERVATION, AND ACCRUED WISDOM IS THE EXTENT TO WHICH IMPERFECT UNDERSTANDINGS AND THE VAGARIES OF PLACE AND CIRCUMSTANCE CAN BE ADDRESSED AND INCORPORATED.

It is an inevitable fact that no design occurs in a context vacuum. Rather, neighboring programs, venues, or watersheds have an interest in what transpires in a non-abstract landscape or place, so ambient interests are part of the colloquium. All members of the colloquium must work to free themselves of prideful, prejudicial agendas, as well as tactical predispositions. Each zoning rule or local ordinance must be so written and attended that openness and flexibility can serve the public good and spirit of the stricture. Laws written yesterday, even if brilliant, articulate, and well conceived for their time, are likely to warrant eventual reconsideration to account for changing times, technologies, and understandings. Any political context in which the governing authorities are focused on their own power, influence, and the service of their “friends”, of course, is inherently unstable in the long run, so any discussion of sustainability under those circumstances is strenuous. Adherence to constitutional first principles at all levels of governance is crucial if political accountability within the colloquium is to pertain.

2. ACCRUED UNDERSTANDING OF SUSTAINED WAYS OF LIVING AND TECHNOLOGIES, ALONG WITH AN OPERATIONAL ETHIC, WHEN INCULCATED IN OUR **CHILDREN**, WILL BE PASSED ALONG TO THEIR CHILDREN.

However clever and brilliant our strategic and tactical applications to sustainable design might be, we must be aware that at any given point in time they are always nascent and imperfect--always coming into being. What is important is the ethics that drive the solutions and the metrics to assess the implementations for modifications of the next iterations. Elders are keepers of wisdom, the middle ones are the practitioners of tried and true ways, and children are the innovators with the energy and naïveté to move us forward. We must have all three, but the circle begins again with each new child. Only the child, if

well ensconced in the ethic of community and accrued knowledge, can listen to wisdom, learn from the masters, and carry on with imagination and alacrity. Without loved and cherished children, all of our brilliant and creative tactics and strategies toward “sustainability” will evanesce into meaninglessness.

3. THAT WHICH IS LOVED IS PERCEIVED AS *BEAUTIFUL*, THAT WHICH IS BEAUTIFUL IS LOVED.

People who love what they do are motivated less by pecuniary remuneration and more by the act of creating that of which they are proud and in which their soul and love are reflected in great beauty. This love and beauty is perceived by others. The Greeks understood that *that which is loved is perceived as beautiful, and that that which is beautiful is loved and cared for*; it's chances for endurance quite strong. Not that long ago, buildings and infrastructure were designed by master builders and built by craftsman. Construction drawing sets were relatively small and things were made to be beautiful and lovable. Unless torn asunder by Philistines, these structures are loved and admired today by people who, as children, had acquired the visceral attributes that enable beauty and quality to move the soul. Today, buildings and infrastructure require construction document sets of enormous proportions, written carefully to assure that even the most unskilled, low-bid contractor can negotiate simple, bullet-proof, albeit ugly, unlovable productions. Such products may have the “latest” in “green technologies,” but they will be torn down in a heartbeat if some subtle perception of even temporary financial gain would suggest its destruction. Children who grow up amid soullessness and ugliness will be inclined to accept the ugly and have immature souls. Each child who grows up amid great beauty is inclined to be motivated to exercise his own inborn gift and become a soulful practitioner of beauty and craft.

4. ALL PLACES ON THE EARTH, ALONG WITH THE PEOPLE WHO INHABIT THEM, ARE UNIQUE TO ALL OTHERS, THIS SINGULAR QUALITY EMBODIED IN THE *GENIUS LOCI*.

Geronimo, the great Apache leader, looking back on his beloved western homeland from a prison at Pensacola, Florida noted:

For each tribe of men Usen created, He also made a home. In the land for any particular tribe, He placed whatever would be best for the welfare of that tribe. When Usen created the Apaches, He also gave them their homes in the West. He gave them such grain, fruits, and game as they needed to eat . . . He gave them a pleasant climate and all they needed for clothing and shelter was at hand. Thus it was, in the beginning: the Apaches and their homes each created for the other by Usen himself. When they are [separated from each other], they sicken and die.

This is the universal understanding of aboriginal peoples. Children grow up in a place and become embedded in its “pattern language,” governed by its numinous guardians. Even in today’s culture, the differences between urban, suburban, and rural people are clear insofar as their dispositions toward everything. The contemporary trend to use standard approaches and off-the-shelf commodities because of the perceived cost implications born of “economies of scale,” tends to debilitate the sensitivities to local numinous guidance and shift to focus inward toward self-absorption and divorce from diversity and community.

Each place on earth, great or small, has its own geological, geographical, ecological, and cultural address or signature---like no other place on earth. Even in a tract subdivision, with four floor plans, eight elevations, and the same fixtures, the homes, within a few months of inhabitancy by a family, become unique to all others that have ever been or ever will be. Even at that scale, a neighbor would feel as a guest in an erstwhile identical house, the singular qualities now quite distinct. This has always been the Way of nature. We tend to fight it, but it really is there. We would do better to discover it to begin with, glory in it, love it, and design to it. Bigotry and intolerance for others would begin to diminish as each community came to respect the differences and beauties of the other.

5. ONLY THE *PLANTS AND ANIMALS* NATIVE TO THE PLACE CAN TEACH US HOW TO SUSTAIN LIFE IN THE PLACE.

Just like the families in the year-old tract subdivision, the native plants and animals have been living on the land, in a relationship with people and each other, but for thousands of years. No healthy area of the earth's surface, even adjacent acres or square meters, have even 75% similarity to another insofar as species composition is concerned. A key to understanding their fecundity and sustainability, however, is to learn the extent to which their inhabitancy was contingent upon their relationship with human culture. The native plants and animals, in their communities, in their place, will flourish if the human cultural relationship with their place is congenial to their needs. They will languish if it is not. They do not lie or take political positions; they have no ego or pride.

In learning to care for the native plants and animals, one soon comes to see that there is no room for pride, ego, arrogance, or expressions of physical power on our part; great theories, isms, and well established academic doctrines can melt away if the empathy of the caretaker is organized around the sustained health and well-being of the place and its plants and animals. If we come to know the plants, for example, by sight and by name, we can see how they respond to our care. They and only they can teach us the Way of the place. The Way is a little different everywhere. That is why there once were so many cultures and languages and more than 25,000 plant species in North America, alone. This acquaintance with the teachers of the place is best initiated in childhood. Among the more obvious relationships that people have had with the land was the burning of the woods and prairies, harvesting for all manner of purposes, and growing staples such as the innumerable variants of corn, squash, potatoes, and bean. So long as all this was done well, life was well and progressed from generation to generation.

Since European settlement, we have lost our way in this regard. Only miniscule parcels of land retain native plants and animals growing in harmony with people. These remnants are widely dispersed across the country. The parts that now are not covered by pavement or commodity-scale crop are dominated primarily by Eurasian and New World camp-following weeds. The principal diversity of our native species, the truth tellers, are confined to these remnants; such remnants now must be regarded as sacred places. Even these sacred places, however, languish under neglect---even as we default more and more of our understanding of the world to infinitely ignorant sources such as ourselves or charismatic leaders and scholars of the day.

Our hope for the future is the discovery of and assessment of these remnants, and to reengage in the understanding of the plants and animals that reside there. It is in the reestablishment of a congenial and loving relationship with them that generations today and those yet unborn can learn the truths of the Way and orient their focus and attentions to things of existential importance. The extent to which all of the plants and animals, “brothers and sisters” as regarded by the native people, are attended with humility and care is the extent to which people can become independent of other influences, which already are perceived as unhelpful to healthy growth and development. It is certain that, in the long view, attending to the stewardship of these remnant sacred places, and in attempting to reintegrate them into our ‘infrastructure’ and landscape, would be beneficial to generations until time beyond mind.

6. A NON-HIERARCHICAL INTEGRATED DESIGN PROCESS, NURTURED BY A *CREATIVE DIRECTOR*, TAKES ADVANTAGE OF ALL OF THE SKILLS NECESSARY TO ACHIEVE THE BUILT OR CONCEIVED PRODUCT.

The Cartesian compartmentalization of the practical and scholarly disciplines has seduced us into thinking things of value are products of individual components concatenated together to produce a whole. While it works well for tools such as airplanes, bridges, and compressors, it does not work well for the soul or for community development and relationships with a living Earth. Consequently, we have highly specialized practitioners in the design fields, such as architects, ecologists, chemists, engineers, and landscape architects. Each has its own *patois* and an infra-disciplinary hierarchy of experts who form the nucleus of individual companies.

The way the contemporary design process usually plays out, one such company is hired as “the lead” on any given project, with the responsibility of the deliverables and the lion’s share of the fees, which of course makes sense, as far as it goes, from a business plan standpoint. As a result, highway engineers are commonly hired to govern planning and site design, if there is a road involved. Architects are hired to do the planning and site analysis if there is a building involved, and so on. All of this is institutionalized within the bid process and the need for communities to avoid accusations of corruption and preferential treatment, which are non-trivial considerations, given the proliferation of Philistines and a chronic interest among most of us in having enough money left over to buy something else cheap, ugly, and un-enduring.

In spite of the best intentions, engineers, for example, focused on highway design are unlikely to diffuse appropriate emphasis on other aspects of the program, even though the road interfaces and connects motorized traffic with buildings, pedestrians, local water bodies, children, retail establishments, and remnant landscapes. The idea of genuine craft or beauty, involving local guilds and artisans is always “icing on the cake.” All except specific highway issues, as distinct components, are “value-engineered” out of the final product. Each discipline is inclined toward its own end, not because they are bad or evil, but because it is the doctrine of reductionist thinking that bedevils all of our efforts.

In order to assure ourselves of roles for craftsmen and artisans in our economy and that the next generation is being cared for, we must sublimate our egos, prides, and

professional chauvinisms and work together to create that which is loved, beautiful, and enduring. One way to begin to separate ourselves from contemporary, unsustainable, Cartesian approaches would be for all of us to work together under the creative direction of some one who has a genuine empathy for the client and community, and understands the importance of melding the disciplines to produce a product of and for the community.

7. IF WE WERE TO FOLLOW THE SEVEN TEACHINGS OF THE POTAWATOMIE, WHICH ARE THE ESSENCE OF BEAUTY, PARTICULARLY WHEN EXPERIENCED IN THE BOSOM OF GRANDMOTHER EARTH **OUTDOORS**, WE COULD ASSURE OURSELVES THAT THE NEXT GENERATION WOULD BE IRRETRIEVABLY DISPOSED TOWARD SUSTAINABLE THINKING AND PRACTICE.

It is out of doors, particularly among streams, native plant communities, and in the presence of loving stewardship, where the countless and ineffable wonders of nature inspire awe, wonder, humility, and a knowledge of reality and place in developing children. It is out of doors where children are free to exercise intelligence with copious amounts of light and infinitely complex encounters. Having a natural out-of-doors is crucial to any community where children of all ages are maturing. Even a vacant lot looks to a small child like a great adventure land. The Seven Teachings of the Potawatomie apply to us all:

- Being outdoors in the lap of Grandmother Earth, we come to **LOVE** the native plants and animals.
- Being outdoors in the lap of Grandmother Earth, we come to **RESPECT** the home of the native plants and animals.
- Being outdoors in the lap of Grandmother Earth, we come to see that it is far more beautiful and complex than any thing we could make, which nurtures **HUMILITY**.
- Being outdoors in the lap of Grandmother Earth, teaches **TRUTHS** that no indoor person can provide with as much veracity or integrity.
- Being outdoors in the lap of Grandmother Earth, acquaints us with the need become **BRAVE**, to avoid complacency, but to risk new things.
- Being outdoors in the lap of Grandmother Earth, teaches us to be **HONEST** with ourselves and all others because the outdoors is unkind to dissemblers.
- Being outdoors in the lap of Grandmother Earth, provides us the **WISDOM** to train the next generation.

To be sure, we now rely on our computers and office spaces to respond to the mountains of paper work that are extorted from us by bureaucracy. So be it. But the fundamental purpose of a “building and site” is as a place for ceremony and community, a place to remove one’s self from inclement weather, a place to sleep without being pestered by errant or inconsiderate pests of all sorts, a place that reminds us who we are and where we are. Only in the context of the soulful accrual of love and beauty, a sense of place, a deep care for the wisdom of elders, freedom for the colloquium, and the nurturing of children can our tactical and strategic brilliance bear fruit in sustainability.