The Comfortable Landscape: How we Perceive Nature and overlook Nurture

Abstract from a book length manuscript

I awaken to the bright light of a coastal spring morning, a saltwater breeze wafting over my head from a narrowly opened double hung window. Outside I can hear the slow rise of a neighborhood. The occasional bird song, a door opening and swinging shut, a car starting, a neighbor singing his regular laments, the questioning call and response barks of dogs, then landscaping equipment and carpenters sound off and form the aural composition of life in exurban America. Suburban sprawl, the hallmark of post-war progress has reached out into once rural countryside here in split-level and rows of ranch, there in cul-de-sac clusters or shingle style mini-mansions. The ideal of prosperity transmogrified into the manicured residential lot and large single family home has even reached back into urban areas in the wake of slum clearance as “pocket neighborhoods”. Lying on a comfortable bed in a sunny bedroom I ponder, why do so many seek the ideal of a single family home? Why has this way of developing communities become the real and envisioned norm in the United States and why is it being replicated throughout the world? The American home with its yard / garden set in a hamlet; village or town is seen as some sort of pinnacle of Western development. Residing in an American home purports to combine the quaintness of traditional English life, the lushness of Mediterranean living and the convenience of American technology. I lie here surrounded by all of those things, I am comfortable, but I am also frustrated and concerned. As a professor of Ecological Art, Architecture and Design, I spend much of my working life advocating the design of thoughtful, nuanced artifacts and places that take ecospheric as well as ergonomic concerns into account. As I mentally prepare for a new day, my thoughts run from being the eavesdropping audience to a neighborhood’s unwitting symphony - to the obligations owning a home ties me to - expenditures of time and money - mortgage payments, aging roofing, siding, and heating system replacement, adequate furnishings for growing children and the essential chores of landscape maintenance.

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century we seem destined to a universal culture that aspires for all members of the human community to share a level of comfort and freedom of movement collectively unseen by any previous generation. Is the ideal of a single-family home and a manicured garden one that can and should be embraced by all of the earth’s inhabitants? I have worked as an estate gardener for several seasons. This work begins in the early spring with removing trees, shrubs, undergrowth and turf to create a garden bed. Several inches of fresh compost are then dug into the soil to create a raised area for planting successive rows of intricately arranged annual and or perennial flowers, as well as ornamental shrubs and grasses. Even well established gardens often need to have their soil enriched and extensively turned over to overcome the growth of weeds and aerate compacted soil. Sometimes the plants are mulched to retain moisture and hinder the growth of competitive invasive plants. An irrigation specialist is called in to ensure the survival of the plants in dry weather. Throughout the late spring, entire summer and early fall the gardens must be visited weekly to remove weeds, fertilize plants, pluck off diseased leaves and faded blossoms, as well as to prune or deadhead each plant. Deadheading consists of pinching off each fully opened or spent flower and cutting back the center stems of plants at areas where the stems divide to encourage fuller foliage and more abundant flowers. Properties that have extensive gardens require a crew of 2-4 gardeners to visit up to four hours once or twice each week. A large wheelbarrow or two of clippings from each garden is hauled away after each visit and discarded at a composting facility for a fee. In the fall the gardens have to be prepared for
the winter by extensively cutting back each plant and removing the roots of annual plants. Though gardening is creative, rewarding work it is also physically demanding, exacting and incredibly time consuming. A trained professional can work fast and achieve abundant blooms while an amateur must work slowly and with great patience to achieve the same results. Many of the properties that can afford visits from a gardening crew are second homes. The care needed to maintain the norm of landscape beauty in a contemporary garden, whether surrounding a modest cottage with lush gardens or a small estate with extensive gardens requires weekly or monthly visits throughout the summer from the following trades-people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th># of workers in crew</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gardening Crew</td>
<td>2-4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Landscaping Crew</td>
<td>2-4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pest Control</td>
<td>1-2</td>
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<td>Tree Surgeon</td>
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<td>Lawn Spraying</td>
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During periods of intense summer plant growth the neighborhoods in which resort homes exist are a maddening concert of industrial grade lawn mowers, line trimmers, leaf blowers, hedge clippers and construction equipment throughout the week from 7 AM until 4 PM. By 5 PM on Friday the landscape is primped and immaculate. Often second homeowner(s) visit only every other weekend or on occasion. One Hamptons estate at which I worked required the largest crews and most extensive landscape care including a professional croquet court that needed service twice a week though the estate remained unoccupied throughout the entire year (the owners decided to spend their time at another property). I have spent many hours of my life as a gardener preparing for a flower show that I knew would go unnoticed while watching a disturbing amount of fuel being consumed for the landscaping equipment in use. Both the plants and I were sprayed with toxic fungicide, pelted by pesticide and fertilizer pellets along or near waterways. The labels on the chemicals used clearly state, “Toxic to shellfish and other aquatic organisms, do not use in a marine environment.” The beautiful gardens showcased at public events and receptions, as scenery in advertisements, on television and in film requires the type of care I describe above. How did such an irrational, neurotic system of garden care become a norm?

Throughout much of history resplendent gardens were the possessions of aristocracy, gentry and corporate tycoons. The gardens were cared for by a platoon of servants. My love of gardens and experience as an estate gardener has led me to consider the history and care of each garden I visit with some depth. Institutional and estate gardens are usually maintained by crews made up of a foreperson who receives a living wage and one or more low wage workers who put in 10-12 hour days throughout the summer as seasonal work, they then struggle for subsistence work throughout the rest of the year. Both the environmental and economic model of maintaining these gardens is truly unsustainable. Stable human communities require regular reliable working conditions, healthy biotic communities
require naturally occurring cycles of growth and decay that do not involve the loading of nutrients in a small segment of the year and the carting off of nutrients throughout the remainder of the year.

Today estate quality gardens are often the dream of an individual with a modest income who purchases plants from a chain of home improvement stores and has little knowledge of how much care is necessary to maintain the garden they hope to undertake. There is no way that an individual can work a 40 hour week and maintain more than 100’ of border garden unless maintaining their garden is their primary, if not only non-work activity. I have also noticed that amateur gardeners who are able to build beautiful and extensive gardens throughout their lifetimes have a problem when they age. The demands of maintaining a large private garden become too much. Someone is often hired to help - placing a strain on the fixed finances of an elderly homeowner. Those of us who will live out full lives will likely end up enfeebled to an extent that the basic routine of caring for our bodily needs requires our full attention. Caring for a garden, even houseplants, can easily become beyond one’s capabilities. So our notion of a private home surrounded by a lush garden of flowering plants is an ideal only attainable by a few and often only attainable through the efforts of others in an unsustainable way.

Just after World War II there was a bright new crop of architects and engineers who graduated from colleges and universities imbued with a set of utopian ideals instilled in them by progressive intellectual professors and design practitioners. At the time architect Frank Lloyd Wright used a term “Usonia” to encapsulate the ideals that much of the post war residential architecture built on the east and west coasts of the United States ascribed to. Usonian homes were small, built largely of natural, inert and biodegradable materials - their design celebrated the beauty of glass, wood, brick, stone and metal. Often Usonian homes were situated on one acre, irregularly shaped lots with the siting of the home arranged so that the property appeared to be in a dense wood of both native deciduous and evergreen trees. Garden areas were confined to small plots surrounding the front entrance of the home and a rear patio of stone or wood slightly above grade. The back patio stepped down to a carelessly maintained area of lawn or a leaf cluttered stand of trees. In the most enlightened communities of new homes, a group of new homeowners would agree collectively not to erect fences between their properties and maintain their property edges as a common wood. An additional lot or two would be purchased for a communal pool and recreation area and the cost and maintenance expenses would also be shared collectively. Usonian homes were to appear as if they had an integral connection with the landscape they inhabited. What Wright came to call “Organic Architecture” - the most notable example of which is his masterwork Fallingwater. The nineteenth century Arts and Crafts philosopher and designer William Morris had earlier condensed this form of communal living down to a single appropriated manor house in his widely read novel “News from Nowhere” and it was these utopian ideals that permeated Wrights thinking. The Usonian, organic concept of Wright and communal society of Morris – both steeped in a notion of the innate connection between human and the surrounding biotic community – were and are an anathema to the American concept of private property.

An acquaintance of mine has converted a modest farmhouse with a detached outbuilding into a multi-family dwelling. The rental income she collects from her tenants allows her to live an artful life of organic gardening and delightful social engagement. All of the tenants have separate entrances and privacy but share a small house and a communal garden, the care of which is inextricably linked with the enjoyment of the house by all of its inhabitants on a daily
basis. The laws that regulate rentals in the neighborhood in which my friends house is located, prohibit the use of a home in this way (many exurban areas “upzone” to single-family home restrictions to increase property values and hence tax revenue). A zoning system that perpetuates the cycle of current suburban landscape development, inflated house prices, high cost maintenance and eventual real-estate market decline is wasteful, unrealistic and unsustainable.

The modern universal notion of suburbia may have its pitfalls but its economy is sustained by cities and we know that the world is becoming an increasingly urbanized place. It is expected that by the end of the millennium nearly ninety percent of the earth’s human population will be living in cities. The current model of contemporary urban development is rooted in the hubristic notion that when a city grows into a metropolis its developers can create additional infrastructure to provide for the inhabitants. More resources can be found (on other planets if necessary) and progress will be made in efficiencies. The real cost of our current mode of urban and suburban development is that it ignores the natural processes that clean our air and water in the most important ways. Rainwater sloshes down asphalt and concrete spillways collecting toxins until it reaches local waterways and eventually the sea. Wastewater is shunted through pipes, collected and separated into that which can be released into a waterway and toxic sludge to be carted off and buried above an aquifer. Air is collected, filtered, heated, cooled, pressurized and forced through the synthetic ductwork of encapsulated structures and then released into the atmosphere as refuse. Light is artificially created and circadian rhythms that influence all life cycles on earth (other than the modern human) are considered incidental, as our work, study and sleep schedules relegate daylight and lunar cycles to a vestige.

Hubris drives our development patterns on, and it has become a cultural practice to create buildings and site them in a landscape meant for a single use in perpetuity with no regard for the larger ecosystem in which the building exists. These buildings are of course continually exposed to the elements and they function and decay according to the patterns and processes of nature. All buildings are eventually replaced, remodeled or repurposed to adapt to the vagaries of time and the evolving needs of successive generations. Any relatively stable community that has existed for a century or more has transitioned from a small village to a town or city, has grown buildings concentrically out from, and within walking distance to, a civic and commercial center. Often a new outpost at the edge of an urban enclave develops into a distinct neighborhood with its own identity and a new concentric community develops. A building built for one purpose at a given time may successively be used as a home, a professional office, a studio, an education center, and other incarnations over time. Neighborhoods are places of constant evolution and the needs of the inhabitants change throughout successive generations. The laws we develop to regulate the creation of our communities need to be as simple and flexible as possible but should be based upon the natural processes of evolution that ultimately regulate our existence. While we know we do not want polluting industrial practices taking place in the midst of our residential communities, over the long arc of human civilization it is clear that communities that are mixed use and pedestrian based are those that provide the most comfortable domiciles. When our work, study and sleep schedules are in closer concert with the hours of daylight available to us we are more productive citizens. When sunlight and fresh air are the basis of our heating and cooling systems human communities are healthier. When animals, plants and beneficial microbes populate our communities as well as people and pets, our water and air are purified in a dynamic but sustainable way. Our ancient traditions of human settlement show a pattern of communities thriving near a source of fresh water bordered by an agricultural reserve with a history of
periodic floods that cover the cropland with a layer of nutritious silt and a nurturing primeval forest that is selectively harvested and replanted to serve succeeding generations. Modern cities are often the overdeveloped offspring of these early settlements and the suburbs that surround them generally situated along waterways as well. So the basic necessities of earth composed of a complex biotic community formed over a long period of time; air in the form of natural breeze and wind that mix, flush, lift and disperse important ecological elements of the biosphere; and water cleansed through a cycle of evaporation, rainfall and filtration through the living geology of an aquifer that are the basic ecology we need to thrive as a species. Increasingly we treat these elements as limited commodities in and around dense urban areas. It is our notion of growth, profit and waste, our limited appreciation of decay and the symbiotic relationship between microbial communities and human communities, our myopia regarding the natural forces that ultimately sustain us that impedes the sustenance and the alleviation of misery for countless members of our own and other species.

Perhaps it would be wise for us to embrace forms of development, agronomy and horticulture that are every bit as beautiful, as nuanced, as lavish as our preferred aesthetic of the synthetic metropolis alternated with private estates both large and small surrounded by lush specimen foliage, with forests and farms sequestered to the hinterlands and occasionally tapped for their natural resources to feed a growth based economy. Perhaps it would be wise to revisit the use and re-use of basic materials and native flora. Agronomy and horticultural practice based not solely on yield and aesthetic appeal but also on ecosystem function, on allowance for a more comfortable succession from one generation to the next, an eye toward the dynamics of the landscape in which we dwell. A landscape that allows for a moderately developed plot with at least half of the property in a “wild” state (an “Eco-Aesthetic” landscape). Though not the current norm, an Eco-Aesthetic building practice also invests those living on the land with a greater depth of knowledge of the geologic, plant and animal communities that ultimately nurture the inhabitants of a structure, more leisure time. Time spent in resting and observing natural settings leads to a fulfilling appreciation of the synergies between animals, plants, minerals, water and sun and the intricate visual complexity of truly stable landscape environments.

If we are to turn our backs to the resource depleting, high maintenance, fixed use forms of human settlement that are our current paradigm, it would be wise to trace the roots of human settlement throughout history to see what enlightening or cautionary tales might lie therein. Are modern notions of beauty innate or have they evolved with culture? Have we discovered forms of human settlement that have a symbiotic relationship to the ecosystem in which they exist? If so who has done or is doing such work and what does it look like? What projects are underway and how well do they embody the notion of collaborating with nature? It is these questions this author will ponder in the pages that follow.

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