

Nature and Society, Nature and City

In Australian cities will nature and society further diverge, or one day tend to converge?

While the great economic growth bonanza of recent decades continues to hold attention, can we wait on *Popular Science* reporters to excite us with the likes of 'Cities of the Future – 23 Technologies to save our crumbling infrastructure'. Or for other promising technological/scientific advances. Hoping that only the environmentally benign ones will see the light of day?

Then again, suppose we have laudable success in introducing environmental improvements – adopting energy efficiency in building design, construction and use; making water saving initiatives; managing waste better; achieving wider acceptance of public transit and cycling; substantially reducing car travel; using only fuel-efficient cars; providing more parks for apartment dwellers.

Would this formula for action constitute the sum total of where we want to get to with nature in the cities?

It's my sense that Australians have a long way to go in reaching a deeper philosophical and therefore a more sustainable footing for their carriage on planet Earth. The task, in broad, is for more reflection on:

- the rest of nature as an indispensable source of wonder and healing;
- the rest of nature not being there merely for people's use and economic exploitation;
- a right in other species to share the planet and not to be displaced by an appropriation of the Earth's space and natural systems for endless human expansion.

But how to raise this consciousness, especially now that cities are where the majority of people on the planet live?

A greater sense of nature's centrality to human life has emerged from various writers – E.O.Wilson, James Lovelock, Thomas Berry, FORE@Yale, Val Plumwood amongst many others. Musicians, artists, novelists, and scientists too have been inspiring. But it would seem with little influence on public discourse in Australia, especially when it comes to the remaking of cities.

For a symbolic rendering of architectural space, Glenn Murcutt's 'tread lightly on the Earth' comes readily to mind. But a wider questioning is needed whilst the place of nature in cities is relegated, more commonly, to contractor parks for leisure or wide hard surfaces broken by 'topiared' plants – not the co-dependence that humans and nature traditionally have derived through gardening and landscaping.

This ('Mainstream') era characterized by the dominance of economic solutions ('production and consumption expansion unbounded') has society in thrall. Incorporated in its all-pervasive 'solutions' are attitudes to population growth ('global, or at least Australian numbers and immigration levels are not a concern'); and techno-scientific pulses ('advances are an unquestioned blessing and can be the answer to most if not all problems').

However attractive many of the achievements of this contemporary drive are, questions remain: does it involve too much of a draw-down on the planet's capacity; and can the Earth go on supporting the richness of evolutionary life in which humans have thrived during the Cenozoic Era?

For their part, cities have been heralded as the 'center and symbol of our times', 'the grandest physical expressions of our humanity', and in our neo-liberal myopic world, 'the growth engines of society'.

So it's no surprise that a recurrent theme of city planning is how to fit more people into areas of the highest and most visible concentration of service, business and government activities - typically CBD's and their surrounds. And to do so by the creation of higher density enclaves, often using recent projections of high population growth opportunistically as a justification for 'transforming Australian cities'.

If the perception of nature as under threat is to be a focus of city lives, the task at hand is surely more than a simple choice of 'build up or out', which is how the issue is usually presented.

Eminent nature philosopher, Thomas Berry, observed, 'Because we live in a human-made environment, the challenge is how to keep... immediacy with the natural world and to establish a traditional wisdom that deepens our understanding of the experience'.

In short, we are faced with building a widespread recognition in society of the fecundity and benefits of nature-consciousness.

So will the occasional trip to the outback, or Antarctica, or a walk in a park, or even the occasional view from a high window onto a tidily landscaped patch, be sufficient to the hour? Somehow I doubt it.

Here are some pointers to that 'something more':

*** By good luck or design, Australians have created elements of a green world where nature enters our lives as a matter of course. Dating back well before the first world war, and based on practices of egalitarianism, co-operation, wealth distribution, a *modest* abode with access to a nearby patch of nature inviting personal use was considered a fair thing. It would be risky to attempt to replace this achievement holus-bolus with some other admittedly successful alternatives imported from places established in other periods of history.**

*** Personally, a favorite story of mine is to re-tell a neighbor's inspired comment. She had bought a house with a dozen, already established large trees. After her house had been damaged by a falling, large eucalyptus branch during a wild storm, she ruminated: 'I've thought for a while of taking out the big trees, but where will the birds go?'**

*** Then the myriad experiences of those who have taken to all kinds of gardening. The many food-producing home gardeners; garden clubs working to restore remnant plant communities, to establish green corridors, or more magically, to bring back the land's built-over natural contours. Or the small-scale school gardening exercise described by writer Denise Gadd that 'snowballed into a full-scale environmental campaign involving the whole school.'**

*** Talking of residential parks, can we do them better? Architectural journalist, Elizabeth Farrelly can only find one since the 90's that gets the nod in Sydney, Surry Hills Moore Park Gardens: 'its sophisticated and varied composition, myriad walkways, luscious planting, parks, pools and established delis..' Further, can we change our notion of residential subdivisions: start by laying out a park, and then adding houses. It's an approach that has sometimes produced fine settings for housing in Melbourne.**

*** There are the health dimensions of living with a deeper sense of nature in our lives. E.O.Wilson explores the notion of biophilia, an indication of which is '.....a positive effect of the natural world and other organisms on health.' So is it doing people a favour separating them from ongoing contact with the natural world, especially in city jobs where the outside world can be treated as a distraction?**

Then there are the fine works from landscape designers such as Ian McHarg, Michael Hough, and others. Not forgetting (as told by Mary White, Peter Fisher and others) Australia's particular gift to the world of its unique landscapes that deserve to be celebrated, not only in tourist guides but wherever we can have their presence to hand.

Ebenezer Howard's 'Garden Cities' is a wonderful experiment that for today speaks to us of the need for life-work-nature integration. Economic geographer, Kevin O'Connor, with his 'five Melbournes' concept, and other leading exponents of multi-centered city form, could be leading the discussion back to a more practical base for what can be achieved with a local/sub-metropolitan focus.

Working in this way, there's no need to deny the occasional provision of higher density accommodation. Nor does it validate sterile, minimalist landscapes for 'new suburbia', taking up valuable grasslands and market gardens while perhaps moving city edges towards fire-threatened areas. They are Mainstream's residential ideal, combining the shared interests of wealthier outer-ring residents, edge developers, highway builders, power companies, and the auto and oil industries. But it *does*

suggest that population stabilization must soon become a policy objective for Australia's major cities.

Within cities, nature waits to play its part as a source of climate cooling, health and enchantment, including for children, and as a community-based activity. Lived in as nature's home, cities can be society's confident path for interaction with some of the Earth's wider life-support systems. It stands in sharp contrast to the alternative: cities as places that single-mindedly drive Mainstream's economic engine faster, with all the now-familiar attendant threats posed to civilisation.

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For further expansion of these comments, materials and references in this article, see *'Nature's home or growth engine: Whereto the city?'* - *New Community Magazine*, v. 7, n.3, Spring 2009 (Borderlands Co-operative, 03-94822805).