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Caring for Places: Sustaining Attention

Urban design that is sustainable allows development energies to build on each other, using the imagination of many people to bring energy and commitment to a locale and to form places that will add value to the lives of those who live there. Excellent places structure the encounters of those who live, work and learn in them in ways that direct our attention to enduring significance and creative potential: nature, individuality, common purpose, cultural connection, and invention. Such places also bring to mind our collective responsibilities to the Earth, to each other, and to those who will follow. Good places help us keep track of who we are and where we fit within a larger system of relationships.

In the end, our capacity to establish lasting conditions depends on our being able to hold the interest and affection of the people who inhabit patches of our world and who will make them sustainable. Making places that grasp the imagination of those who inhabit them is a necessary part of creating cities and countrysides that will be effective over the long term and that will be deemed worthy of passing on through generations.

The places we should care about define territories that are lived in, have fellow beings, are subject to the sun and its cycles, are rooted in the earth and its processes. They are here and now, but are connected to their past, and bear seeds that anticipate a future. They are built in ways that explore the evolving capabilities and interests of their cultures. Such places will not endure without change, but will keep adjusting to the conditions of growth. They will not be wasted by neglect or wanton destruction; nor will they be wasteful.

Many call now for a total revamping of ways in which we inhabit the earth, insisting that nothing less than a wholly new vision will allow us a viable future. They may be right, but if so, this must be achieved incrementally. The advocacy of total transformation always arrives in error; the conditions of our lives, and the interests that we hold, are so numerous that any singly motivated encompassing vision must be suspect. Sweeping modifications have so often led us to disastrous consequences that our search for measures of global effectiveness, must seek paths that are based in local knowledge and will secure continuing engagement and care.

Concern for sustainable design is motivated, surely, by a growing awareness of climate change and by the growth in population, with its consequent demands upon resources. Those demands manifest themselves in the lives of most people, though with radically different consequences: strife and starvation in far too many parts of the globe; inconvenience, changes in lifestyle, and expanded opportunities in most of the places where this journal will be read. These disparities are not casual, nor can they be sustained. There must be, and will be, substantial change; our choice is between the management of effective transformation and the onset of cataclysmic consequences. The latter will come not all at once, but will be camouflaged in patches of decay, in destruction and terror, in events and conditions apparently remote but embedded nevertheless in our own lives. As designers and stewards of environments, we should commit ourselves to countermoves, to creating a bright patchwork of places that embody potential. These will result from the inventive pursuit of forms, visions and policies that secure individual and community support, yet bring attention to issues that reach well beyond local concern.

These will be places of responsible promise.

— *Donlyn Lyndon*