

From the Life Spirit of Unbuilt Place to Spirit Enriching Built Space: Towards a Spirit Centric Urban Environment

Maged Senbel

School of Community and Regional Planning, University of British Columbia, Vancouver
(Canada)

senbel@interchange.ubc.ca

Of the two imperatives for spiritual renaissance in contemporary culture one is critically urgent and the other profoundly catalytic. The first is derived from a collectivist epistemology and the corporeal reality of ecological integrity, and the second from the basic ontological quest for a sublime connection to a higher purpose. They are derived from consequentialist arguments and metaphysical explorations respectively. Their requisite architectural manifestation is a spirit centric built environment that cultivates values of conscience and reciprocity between ways of being and ways of building. This paper builds a rationale for a spirit centric built environment and sketches its basic characteristics.

One set of causes for mainstream spiritual malaise comes from our unquenchable thirst for consumption of matter; energy, metals, minerals, timber, manufactured goods and processed foods. Another cause of spiritual malaise is the commodification of the universe and our apathetic internalization of the values of consumer culture. We find ourselves consuming uncontrollably, unsustainably and unhappily [1]. Our consumption is occurring at rates and intensities that are ultimately self-destructive and we have become spiritually dormant; substituting the enlightenment of intersubjectivity with the ego-centricity of material acquisition.

Building on the work of ecological ethicists [2-4], this paper sketches broad strokes of inquiry into the relationship between spirituality on the one hand; and architecture, construction, living systems and human behaviour on the other. It explores ways through which spiritual intuition can be a source of moral reasoning in choosing to reduce our per capita resource consumption. How can spirituality help create buildings and cities of material reverence and conservation? How can spiritually imbued architecture and urban design help satiate our senses and wean us off our addiction to energy intensive material consumption?

Consequentialist and utilitarian ethics require us to act now to avoid the anticipated hazards of eroding our ability to enjoy future consumption at today's levels [5]. Quite apart from the questionable morality of consuming so much of future generation's share of the earth's resources that theirs will be a world of scarcity, there is the self-interested utilitarian demand of retaining sufficient resilience in ecological systems that they can continue to perform the services that sustain today's societies.

This paper questions architecture's contemporary preoccupations with formal experimentation and constructional innovation. It does not critique architectural expression itself but rather the cost of foregoing a grounding in *the life spirit of unbuilt place and the spirit enriching potential of built space*. The paper calls upon architects and urban designers to respond to the need for spiritual maturity in how we conceptualize, create and construct built form. Our ability to improvise, innovate and invent is unequivocal. Mining, trading, shipping and manufacturing are so fine tuned that we have the capacity to bring together materials from anywhere on the planet, process them anywhere on the planet and ship them to anywhere on the planet to build structures that can withstand any climate. We have perfected the machinery of consumption and have become addicted to its sensory rewards.

Even when we question the morality of habitual consumption in a world of limits, we find ourselves unable to deviate from the ruts of excess. Excess, in material terms, can be measured by how much more of the world's resources we use to maintain mainstream lifestyles in the North than is necessary to achieve measures of health and happiness in the South. A key contributor to excess is consumer culture's conflation of material acquisition with happiness and success. Insulating ourselves from the power of advertizing requires a spiritual fortitude to illuminate the illusion of contentment through material acquisition and to reveal its illusory nature. In its place spirituality would have us cultivate contentment through human relationships and emotional communities of compassion, sharing, giving and love [6-9].

The ethic I am raising here precedes the processes of cultural expression through architecture. It is an ontological question about the creation of culture. It is a deliberate quest for an ecologically connected culture. Measurement tools, and materials and construction science have innovated to help reduce building energy consumption. The cumulative result of our progress is that we are consuming more efficiently but ultimately we are simply consuming more. We are further away from the elusive goal of being able to sustain today's lifestyles for our children and grandchildren. Somehow the development of an ecological epistemology has been stunted by our consumer culture. Instead we have rampant consumerism with a green veneer.

Rather than simply refining the workings of consumer culture, we need a fundamental directional change in everyday praxis. This paper proposes spiritual asceticism as a possible catalyst for this change. Many spiritual traditions, including indigenous, Muslim and Buddhist practices encourage a deep consciousness of the inherent value of all matter that resides in the universe. They teach that living things and inanimate objects all reverberate with a universal consciousness that requires us to revere their place in the universe and

the value they add to the balance of the cosmos. We are embedded in the ecosphere, integral to its functioning and utterly dependent on it.

Numerous epistemological perspectives fully comprehend the meaning of the human subservience to a higher order. Deep ecologists see it as species nested in complex biological webs. Some spiritualists see it as subservience to a divine order and others see it as intersubjectivity between inseparable divine lives. Bioregionalists provide valuable understanding into the primacy of local watersheds and ecosystems in setting values and defining parameters for inhabiting a particular place. Spiritual ascetics have extended this epistemology to a daily practice of simplicity, humility and subservience that offer some clues into how we might organize urban systems around minimalist practice.

Spirit centric architecture would explore characteristics that rise to the call for a spiritually mature integrated morality. It would exhibit a substantive frugality of minimalism, localism and bioregionalism derived through ethical deliberation and cultivated through spiritual consciousness. This paper proposes spirituality as a cultivator of a materially conservative life; and an architecture that embodies spiritual integrity and facilitates materially conservative and spiritually abundant lifestyles.

References

1. Layard, R., *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*. 2005, New York: The Penguin Press.
2. Beatley, T., *Environmental Ethics and Planning Theory*. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 1989. **4**(1): p. 1-32.
3. Naess, A., *Ecology, Community, Lifestyle*, ed. D. Rothenberg. 1989, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Zimmerman, M., *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity*, . 1994, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
5. Meadows, D., J. Randers, and D. Meadows, *The Limits to Growth: The 30-year Update*. 2004, White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Pub. Co.
6. hooks, b., *all about love*. 2000, New York: Perennial.
7. McDaniel, J., *Spirituality and Sustainability*. *Conservation Biology*, 2002. **16**(6): p. 1461-1464.
8. Porritt, J., *Sustainability without Spirituality: a Contradiction in Terms?* *Conservation Biology*, 2002. **16**(6): p. 1465.
9. Wallis, J. (2005) *Hearts and Minds: For the Health of the Nation*. Sojourners Magazine.

ⁱ The study of happiness and life satisfaction is a large and growing body of research that is predominantly focused on defining, quantifying and comparing measures of happiness. See the World Database on Happiness (Veenhoven, R., World Database of Happiness, Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Available at: <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>) The Bhutan experiment developing a Gross National Happiness is a pioneering initiative generating interest and research activity. Frank Dixon (2004) wrote an informative piece related to this effort linking Western economics to barriers for achieving happiness. A relevant question for the purposes of this paper is the measure of wealth beyond which happiness does not seem to increase.