

Regarding Sacred Landscapes and the Everyday Corollary

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Sacred landscapes provide both foundation and a qualitative index by which to design and evaluate landscapes in everyday life where people can experience spiritual renewal. A presentation will illustrate six signs of sacred landscapes, with example case studies from Western Tibet, Japan and the Canadian Shield, addressing the nature of spiritual experience and its relationship to landscape.

Making my way through woods of the Canadian Shield, billion year-old primal basement granite rock. On a path navigating an island surrounded by shrub swamp and shallow marsh, through a grove of mature hemlock we call The Cathedral, I found myself thinking: surely, here is a landscape that must be connected to the sacred fabric of the universe. I gasped in this grove of beauty and majesty. Stopped in my tracks, my heart skipped a beat, attentive to a profoundly, mysterious and intimate relationship to something present both within and around me, a luminous familiarity with this place. Surrender and embrace.

In the context of everyday life was this a spiritual experience? Buddhist traditions regard appreciation for beauty of landscape and architecture as a boundless quality of mind: an expression within each individual of the *Buddha-nature*, considered the foundation of spiritual development. Among western traditions, both Plotinus and Thomas Aquinas regarded beauty as transcendental quality flowing from divinity.

Just as a beautiful landscape is expression of divinity and spiritual practice, so is one's encounter with beauty in an everyday place equivalent to that experienced in a sacred landscape. Examples are cited in the Buddhist texts *Lalitavistara*, *Avatamsaka Sutra*, *Vimalakirti Sutra*; as well as Plotinus' *Enneads*.

Taken further, both Buddhist and western philosophers such as Blake, Emerson, Bachelard and Merleau-Ponty questioned the seemingly hard edge placed between thoughts and substances observed on either side of one's skin.

In this light, the body and mind and that of the surrounding environment are seen to exist in a profoundly interactive way, in which the operations of solidity, wetness, heat, wind and space composing one's body and that of the environment are the same. Just as exterior spaces are viewed as reflections of the inner spaces of an individual, so is one's experience an expression of the landscape – mirrors of each other. And just as the body and mind have the

ability to alter qualities of the landscape in which one lives, so does a landscape have the ability to alter the state of one's body and mind.

Sacred landscapes have a special role in this experience. Transformed as a medium for pilgrims' devotional practice, the sacred landscape is an integral place in one's spiritual path enhancing inner strength. With magical and mysterious qualities, they captivate and move the mind to states of increased awareness – opening up the heart, energizing feelings and beliefs associated with spiritual dimensions of life.

In many traditions, sacred landscapes are viewed as embodiment of spirits themselves, deities as recognizable natural forces, and are designed as artistic expressions of practices used in spiritual quests. Just as a sacred landscape strengthens physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health in a balanced and harmonious relationship with the natural and social environment, so can everyday landscapes that possess the qualities of a sacred landscape do the same.

If a spiritually attuned experience is present in a seemingly everyday place, does that denote a sacred landscape? In Buddhist traditions the caveat for designation lies in the four-fold ordination process: production by natural forces, investment with power, modification by spiritual teacher, and reverence and maintenance by devoted pilgrims.

Ordination sets the place where the spiritual experience becomes tangible as form and space; where the most profound relationship between people and landscape arises as Mahayana Buddhism's *Fields of the Six Perfections* – the equivalent of Heaven on Earth. These fields correspond to six degrees of subtlety in procedures of both meditation and design of sacred landscape.

The six signs of sacred landscape serve as qualitative index for designing and evaluating a special place in everyday life, focus of this presentation.

A list of these six assuredly is subjective; however, grounded in experience, historical precedence, philosophical view and spiritual texts (*Mahavastu, Prajnaparamita Sutra, Vimalakirti Sutra, and Guides to Pretapuri*).

1. Favourable Context – refers to selecting the location, a field of generosity: a place of refuge, *auspicious* setting, like a *mandala* nestled in the embrace of landscape; a *landscape transition zone*, embodied balance and harmony of the universe, absorbing beneficial and mitigating negative life forces.

2. Contained – refers to setting the relationship with personal and social environment through analysis, house-cleaning, a field of ethical

application: distinct form in space – distinct space surrounded by form; silence cradled by sound, light cradled by night; identifiable features and qualities in distinct contrast with chaotic or nebulous surroundings.

3. Coherent – refers to organizing the framework, arranging the meditation place, a field of patience: an orderly arrangement of constituent parts, clearly organized to help a spiritual journey make sense – enclosure, gateway and paths on which to focus for guided, directed entry, transition and movement, each in its place. Corresponds to Aristotle's *definiteness* and Aquinas' *integrity*.

Slowly slowly every step a prayer.

4. Composed – refers to creatively designing the feature, formulating the meditation, a field of high resolve: an intentional arrangement of form and space in nature's lyrics and architecture's scores, observant to objects, activities and thoughts binding mind and landscape. Corresponds to Aristotle's *symmetry* and Aquinas' *proportion*.

5. Clarity – refers to illuminating design intent, luminosity in meditation, a field of concentration: a simple format pointing to less in order to see more, with unwavering attention to just one thing; providing opportunity to control thoughts and actions. Corresponds to Aristotle's *order* and Aquinas' *clarity*.

6. Artistic expression of Contemplation – refers to conveying the story in dialects of practice and spiritual views, a poetic field of wisdom:

*Mandala Pure Land Paradise Nature Breath God Silence
Presented with the glory of transcendence,
how will you inhabit this Divine Everyday Space ---*

