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NATURAL AREAS: PLACES OF BEAUTY AND FEAR

by David Orsini

In recent years there has been increased support for taking some highly manicured urban landscapes out of their costly maintenance programs and allowing natural processes to increase the bio-diversity of these sites. These diversified landscapes are being promoted as part of a new urban ecology, one which incorporates the dynamics of natural systems in an urban context. These naturalized areas offer many ecological, educational, social, emotional, and economic benefits for urban dwellers.

Though naturalized urban open areas have found great appeal with a heightened awareness and support for the environment, the creation of such spaces presents safety concerns to many urbanites who feel vulnerable within these areas. Two British open-space researchers, Carolyn Harrison and Jacquelin Burgess, made an interesting discovery during a series of group discussions with that little-consulted body of people – the users of open space. They found that diversified landscapes such as woodlands, shrub thickets, and tall grass meadows were not only the valued of open spaces but they also provoked some of the strongest feelings of insecurity and personal vulnerability. This paradox represents a profound challenge for environmental designers dealing with naturalized open spaces. Issues of safety should be of central importance in the future planning, design and management of these areas in order to make them truly accessible. However, safety in urban open space is an area of environmental design where not a great deal is known and where research is still in its infancy.

The sense of vulnerability provoked by natural areas is thought to be deeply rooted in our psyche. Jay Appleton, a British Geographer, states that all animals, including humans, are motivated to perceive their surroundings in a certain way and that environmental information is acquired and stored in such a way as to maximize the ability to survive. His postulate, known as Prospect- Refuge, states that there is a benefit in being able to see and not be seen, or to see from a secure position. The ability to have channels open so that environmental information can flow freely is the idea of having prospect (openness). The ability to achieve concealment from view of potential perpetrators is known as refuge (protection). Appleton states that "... a landscape which affords both a good opportunity to see and a good opportunity to hide, is aesthetically more satisfying than one which affords neither ...". This postulate first elucidated in 1975, has been the source of much contentious debate, and is difficult to prove or disprove. However, an important issue raised by it is a person's predilection for possessing sufficient environmental information such that the immediate surroundings do not arouse either apprehension or insecurity. Areas in which people have a confined field of view or are unable to ascertain the presence or absence of dangerous elements in their immediate surroundings create uncertainty in perceived safety, or ambivalence in environmental

information. People tend to feel uncomfortable in these environments and as a result tend to avoid them.

Fear of wooded areas is a recurrent theme in Western folklore; children's stories such as Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel are examples. Our apprehension can also be seen in the etymological root of the word "ambush" which is "bush". Whereas fear of natural areas has often been associated with animals and mythical characters, fear of such areas in contemporary urban settings is predominantly associated with crime and antisocial activities.

How does one determine whether a landscape is safe? Many look to crime statistics, but as an indicator these statistics can be unreliable and misleading. Many crimes, particularly sexual assaults, go unreported; and low crime statistics may in fact be influenced by people's avoidance of an area because they perceive it to be a high-risk environment. It is, therefore, important to consult both the users and non-users of these areas in order to gain insights into the problems and ultimately to find the solutions. Users of an area can often offer insights which may be unknown or go unnoticed by those who design and manage these sites. Non-users can also provide insights into why the area does not appeal to them and what improvements could be undertaken to attract them to the sites. Safety is ultimately a matter of perception. A myriad of factors influence one's perception of safety in the landscape – presence of others, familiarity with the site, conditions of the site, media reports, past experience, and one's gender and physical ability. This list is by no means exhaustive. The condition of the site is very important to the perception of safety. Where there is debris or evidence of vandalism, people will often come to the conclusion that the area is neglected and that it is a place where "undesirables" congregate – an unsafe place.

It is ironic that women, children, older adults and the physically disadvantaged who are most dependent on nearby urban nature areas for respite from the city and for contact with nature experience the greatest level of insecurity in these landscapes. The wondrous opportunities for exploration and unstructured play these areas offer to children are often curtailed due to parents' preoccupation with the safety of these areas. Other options such as nature camps or fresh air camps clearly do not have the desired frequency for an ongoing unstructured discovery of the natural world. This pervasive fear of urban areas is perpetuating the environmental illiteracy so endemic to our time and culture.

It is vital, therefore, that in the future, planning, design and management of urban nature areas deal with people's apprehensions and feelings of insecurity in these areas. This is important if we are to transform our relationship with nature in cities from one of alienation to one of integration.