

Four Elements: Water, Earth, Air, Energy— Sustainable Approaches to Public Art And Landscape Design

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Introduction

The Challenge: Research that the National Park Service (NPS) and the Council of Governments have compiled for the *Metropolitan Washington, DC Green Infrastructure Demonstration Project* reveals that the region is losing 28-43 acres of open space each and every day and will until the year 2020. In fact by the year 2030 two-million more people will join the region. Although this project focuses on metro-Washington, DC, almost every metro-region in the US is experiencing similar growth, development and open space loss.

When word of these findings was released in September 2004 the Washington Post wrote an excellent story and for about one month of time, we had some minimal connection with the public we serve. People used the figures at public meetings to advocate for local green space efforts, developers demanded a retraction claiming that the figures were bogus; and some said that they were concerned by the loses but felt helpless to do anything. However, no one was outraged; no one wrote or spoke out about the trend; and no one spoke for plants, animals, the soil, water, and air that this sprawling development pattern is forever changing.

Is it that people don't care about the loss of open space and the destruction of living resources? Or, is it that the written and spoken words we use to communicate important environmental—quality of life issues, with the public don't mean anything and they routinely fail to connect with people. Lukas Beckman, a writer and a dominant figure in the creation of the German Green Party, wrote, "*We need new sources of knowledge so that words do not become more and more devoid of meaning*". The inspiration of art is an essential and primary source to this connection between people and their environment.

My Background

Joe Eugster, my father, was born in Switzerland. He came to the US when he was 12, was high school educated, served in the military and worked most of the time in as a produce manager for a supermarket called Bohack. He also worked as a sheet metal technician for Grumman aircraft and did second jobs doing landscape construction.

My father could draw, had a sense of design, and an eye for the beautiful landscapes of the North Fork of Long Island where we lived. He appreciated jazz—he introduced me to *Sketches of Spain* by Miles Davis, a haunting trumpet solo that continues to create images of places I have never been. He had a creative streak that was hidden below the tasks of his day-to-day life. My interest in art, landscape design and creative approaches to my work were nurtured by my father.

Although my early studies in landscape architecture emphasized and exposed me to design—and the arts, I struggle to sketch, act, sing or paint. My education in ecological planning trained me to use interdisciplinary approaches in my work and I view artists to be essential parts of the teams we create to accomplish projects, programs, policies and social change. Photographer Ansel Adams describes the relationship between artists and the rest of us when he said, *“The role of the artist is to reach into all fields and vitalize them in imaginative, human ways”*.

Since I began landscape design work in 1970 I have had the opportunity to work with artists, and use fine arts, in many of my projects. By collaborating with artists, and visiting projects that have used the arts, I've been able to network with creative people throughout the U.S. and around the globe. This exposure, and practice, has encouraged me to look at my work from a different view than I might normally.

Sustainable Approaches

My remarks today will briefly describe selected projects that illustrate sustainable approaches to public art and landscape design. More information on each effort is available on request.

Writers: Chuck Little, a former advertising executive, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers employee, environmental advocate and author, once said to me, *“You do excellent reports but you don't write very well. You should hire writers, like me, to translate your reports into information that people can understand”*. Chuck would remind me regularly that *“Behind every successful conservation movement is a writer”*.

We routinely use writers to help us communicate government actions and activities to the public. For example, in 1994 while I worked with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Chesapeake Bay Program, we called upon Tony Hiss, author of many books including *The Experience of Place*, to speak at the *“Toward A Community Vision Summit”* to help local leaders define a vision for the Annapolis Neck Peninsula based on social, economic and ecological needs. Tony used evocative words and pictures about design to help people understand alternative ways for dealing with changing cities and countrysides.

In 1994 EPA and the Ecosystem Recovery Institute, Inc. held a workshop on *Natural History and Nature Writers*. The workshop promoted stewardship and conservation of sensitive wetlands and waters through natural history documentation and nature writing. It featured a combination of field trips and discussions and included writer and Baltimore columnist Tom Horton, Jean Worthey, host of the television show *“Hodge Podge Lodge”*, Dan Willard of Public Radio's *“Earth Notes”*, and many government and private sector interests.

Appropriately the workshop program quotes noted ecologist Aldo Leopold who once said. *“Landscape ecology is putting the sciences and the arts together for the purposes of understanding our environment”*.

Painters: In 1986 year I was assigned to lead a NPS team to develop a new National Park in Scranton, located in the Lackawanna Valley of PA. As we began to work on the plans for the Steamtown railroad yard site we went out to talk with the community about our task. At one of our meetings a local citizen named Pete Horger stood up, holding a picture of the painting by George Innes, *“The Lackawanna Valley”*, and said *“This is our vision for Steamtown, Scranton and the Lackawanna Valley”*. George Innes, as you may know, was influenced by the Hudson River School and arguably is one of the greatest 21st century landscape painters.

That brief exchange with community leaders underscored the importance of painting to describe values that people hold important as well as articulate visions that they have of their landscapes for the future. The painting represented an important time in the U.S. and American landscape painting, when industry arrived in the pastoral landscape. The 1855 painting, as you may know

showed the idea that machine technology is a proper part of the landscape. The artistic vision, succinctly articulated, helped to change the direction of our planning team to look not only at the site but also the valley in the context of the human ecology that defined the past, present and future of the railroad yard.

Through the 1980's I had a series of conversations with Chuck Little about the great landscapes of America. We shared the view that the special places of America were changing, their natural and cultural values were being destroyed, and they need to be protected. As we discussed which ones warranted protection Chuck once asked me, "*Have you figured out what a great landscape is?*" Before I could answer he said, "*A great landscape is what, culturally, society thinks it is. Society's opinions are registered through a variety of means which can be objectively studied: literature and the arts; information media; social and economic behaviors; and the like*". We often use the writings about and paintings of places to bring attention to important values, to stimulate local pride in those places, and to foster dialogue about the future of these communities or regions.

The idea of "Great Landscapes of America" inspired the then-Congressman Peter Kostmayer of Pennsylvania to propose *The Great American Landscapes Act of 1990*. We catalogued landscape protection efforts and described the value of these places, often using paintings and sketches. Kostmayer proposed to amend the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965 to authorize the National Endowment for the Arts to recognize and to encourage the wise and appropriate future use of significant American landscapes. Although the legislation was never enacted it brought together supporters from the arts, the design professions, government and political offices to call for protection of America's landscapes.

Writers & Painters: I've long admired the painting of wildlife that John James Audubon did. Studying Audubon's *The Birds of America* continues to amaze and inspire me. It wasn't until I found a copy of his book, *Delineations of American Scenery and Character* did I realize that Audubon, in addition to painting—and taxidermy, and hunting, wrote about wildlife, places and people. In 1986, while I was working for NPS in Southern NJ helping a community save the Great Egg Harbor River, we shared a brief story that Audubon wrote about a visit he made to the Great Egg to paint. Audubon wrote, "*Many a drawing I made at Great Egg Harbor, many a pleasant day I spent along its shores; and much pleasure would it give me once more to visit the good and happy family in whose house I resided there...*"

The story sparked considerable local pride, was reported in the local paper, and brought attention to Audubon the artist as well as the people and the river protection effort. Audubon's painting and writing reaffirmed what people knew—that this landscape and its people are special. These communities worked with Congress to have the Great Egg designated a National Scenic and Recreational River in 1992.

In 1990 we used Audubon's writing and painting, as well as a book about Audubon's experiences by Donald Culross Peattie, in a cooperative project between EPA and the National Audubon Society called "*Audubon's America*". Audubon's America was designed to go beyond traditional approaches to protect wetlands and other natural values. We wanted to increase the public's recognition of important areas and encourage more positive relationships between natural areas and people in order to encourage better decision-making.

Audubon's America used painting and writing in a 36-state effort to bring public attention to natural values; talk about their destruction, and advocate for local protection projects.

During that effort we used Audubon's visit to Jim Thorpe, Rockport, and Weatherly, PA to create a project called the "*Exploring Audubon's America Tour*". Citizen-historian Dale Hilderbrand, Diane Madl of the Pennsylvania Parks Department, and local leaders developed a 53-mile walking and driving audio tour to enable people to retrace Audubon's steps when he visited the area in 1829, enjoy the special qualities and bring attention to need for protection. Signs and a

120-minute cassette tape serve as the guides for the tour, which is part of an ecotourism effort that supplements other economic development activities in an economically depressed region.

Performing Artists: In 1991, while with EPA, I was asked to develop a teacher's guide for wetlands education for grade school children. Knowing little about education, and even less about what grade school children are interested in, I contacted Peyton Lewis of the National Children's Theater for the Environment to collaborate. With an embarrassingly small amount of money, Peyton and I designed a children's play called *Willa in the Wetlands*. The play was performed by actors in a theater in the round and featured Willa, a modern day Alice in Wonderland, looking for priceless treasures in a wetland. What she found was "*Johnny Rockfish*", "*Shirley the Pink Shrimp*", *Wild Rice*, the "*Fiddling Fiddler Crabs*", *Blue Heron*, and others who help her understand the true values of and threats to the natural world. Peyton and her performing artists leveraged my dollars with other EPA funds and performed more than 15 times to enthusiastic children.

Artisans: In 1996 I worked on a sustainable development reinvention project for EPA. We created a Sustainable Development Challenge Grant Program and some of our funds went to support the arts. The grant process supported the work of such artists as Alan Comp of the Office of Surface Mining, introduced me to Tim Collins of Carnegie Mellon University, and brought dollars to what is now called "*Hand Made in America*". Hand Made. A North Carolina-based effort, works to implement environmentally sustainable economic solutions that emphasize the craft industry, enhance opportunities in the marketplace, and develop entrepreneurial strategies for the region's crafts artisans. EPA funded a demonstration project to show how native grasses could be grown to create sources of materials for this industry—while helping address water quality and habitat issues.

Working with EPA and 65 government and private sector agencies and organizations we used this same concept in 1994 to develop a consortium focused on the "*Atlantic Flyway Byway*" on the Delmarva Peninsula of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia. The Byway effort links the protection of migratory birds with ecotourism activities including the arts. Using a National Environmental Education and Training Foundation Grant, and a great deal of sweat-equity, we organized local interests to use the art—primarily wood carving, sculpture, photography and painting, of the birds, people and places of the Delmarva to create alternative economies.

Film-makers & Musicians: Some of my recent collaborations have been with Dave Eckert, a local film-maker in Northern VA. Dave's does films on community-based environmental issues such as restoring a badly degraded stream called Four Mile Run; protecting the water quality of the Occoquan River—a major source of drinking water for Northern VA; and encouraging "*Reining in the Storm*" through individual action to control storm water. Dave's work, which uses photography and interviews with local people and experts to make his points, resonates with people far more than the reports that we write or possibly read.

As a part of the Four Mile Run effort, Dave produced the film called "*Four Mile Run, Reviving an Urban Stream*" with funding from URS, Inc. and others. With the help of Mutual of Omaha he recruited Jim Fowler, once the host of a television show called "*Wild Kingdom*" to narrate the film. Jim grew-up on Four Mile Run.

Eckert went further and recruited Andrew Acosta and The New Old Time Pickers to select the instrumental themes used in the film and write a song about little, banged-up Four-Mile Run. Dave said, "*Every river and stream deserves to have a song*". To the delight of the local community the New Old Time Pickers wrote "*Run, Four Mile Run*". The song has come to symbolize the spirited community working to regenerate the tiny stream. Dave says, "*If you listen to the song you will be down in Four Mile Run in no time*".

Returning to the Challenge

The loss of open space in metropolitan Washington, DC, and the influence of my collaborators, has led me to a paper by Lukas Beckmann on Joseph Beuys, the famous German artist, performer, social sculpture and advocate for the Green Party in Germany. Beckmann and Beuys have both taken issue about the damage that we inflict on the places that we live and work in and visit. They believe that, *“The sense of the meaningfulness of the whole, the interconnectedness and cohesion of this world, the connection between the plant, animal and human world are central”*.

As I have read Beckmann’s writing, and researched Joseph Beuys, I’ve been inspired with Beuys’ campaign *“How I Explain Paintings to a Dead Hare”*, which was intended to make people aware of the ecological damage that results from the actions of humanity. The campaign was described by some critics as “a complex tableau about the problems of language and about the problems of thought, of human consciousness, and the consciousness of animals”. Beuys believed that *“we are killing nature, animals, soil, forests—the external organs of mankind—all of which we need as oxygen sources or sources of food. He believed that in order to understand what we are doing, we have to enter into a dialogue with the animal world, with the plant world, with the soil, without which we cannot live, because mankind’s progress in it’s evolution has only been achieved with the help of the creatures that we are now destroying”*.

With the help of Tim Collins, Dale Medearis of EPA’s Office of International Programs, and other artists we plan to explore ways to use the arts to more evocatively communicate what is happening to open space and the living resources that depend upon, and are sustained by it. Traditional approaches to communicate the impact of the small and large land use decisions have proven, without a doubt, dated and in need of change. Artists can, and frankly should, play a role in being a catalyst for social and land use change and stewardship.

Chuck Little said, *“Behind every successful conservation movement is a writer”*. I believe that behind every successful sustainable landscape design is an artist. The primary job of an artist, according to Joseph Beuys, *“is to introduce and encourage notions of a better world”*. Sustainable approaches to government art and landscape design are possible. Government projects are an opportunity for artists to help achieve that notion and create more of a public ecological conscience.

I wish you continued success in your work. Thank you.

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