

Journal of Comparative Urban Law and Policy

Volume 5

Issue 1 *A Festschrift in Honor of Arthur C. Nelson on the Occasion of his Retirement - Agenda for Building a Changing World Responsibly: Commentaries and Reflections by Leaders in Urban Planning, Policy, and Design*

Article 8

2022

Envisioning Health, Safety, and Welfare for All: Retrospect and Prospect

Frederick Steiner

University of Pennsylvania, fsteiner@design.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/jculp>



Part of the [Landscape Architecture Commons](#), [Land Use Law Commons](#), [Urban, Community and Regional Planning Commons](#), [Urban Studies Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Steiner, Frederick (2022) "Envisioning Health, Safety, and Welfare for All: Retrospect and Prospect," *Journal of Comparative Urban Law and Policy*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 8, 42-51.

Available at: <https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/jculp/vol5/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Reading Room. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Comparative Urban Law and Policy* by an authorized editor of Reading Room. For more information, please contact gfowke@gsu.edu.

ENVISIONING HEALTH, SAFETY, AND WELFARE FOR ALL RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Fritz Steiner*

ABSTRACT

This essay is a reflection on my academic career in community and regional planning as well as landscape architecture. That look back over five decades provides the basis about speculation for the future of planning and design. It addresses the major challenges of our time, including social justice and climate change, through the lens of design, ecology, and landscape.

LOOKING BACK

Planning the future of anything is ambitious, audacious, seemingly impossible, and necessary. This is certainly the case for human communities and regions, which are complex socio-ecological systems.

Yet, we planners try. I entered the field through three life-changing events. First, I helped organize the first Earth Day, actually Earth Week, at the University of Cincinnati in 1970. One of my tasks was to assemble a book fair. There were a few books about the environment in those days. Along with those by Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold, there was landscape architect and planner Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature* with the black and white NASA image of the Earth from space on its back cover. As a design student, I was star struck, which led to the second life-changing event.

In Cincy's College of Design, Architecture, and Art (DAA), as it was known then, students could take, and were encouraged to take, courses in related fields. I began to take courses in DAA's undergraduate urban planning program. The program was taught, for the most part, by architects focusing on physical planning and urban design. But the program was infused with social activism and emerging interests in historical preservation. Perhaps the most dynamic faculty member was Harris Forusz, a protégé of Colin Rowe's at Cornell. For me, the most influential was Tom Jenkins, a sociologist-planner, educated at the University of Chicago and Harvard. He merged social concerns with the built environment and introduced his students to broad readings in planning and design.

In the midst of the activism of the time, which faculty like Tom and Harris were deeply engaged in, I began to move away from my graphic design major. I enjoyed designing posters for rock concerts but felt the Basel-Yale approach that

* Dean and Paley Professor, Stuart Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania.

dominated the curriculum stifling. Fortunately, the University of Cincinnati features co-op education, so I had the chance to pursue my new interest out in the world.

My third life-changing event was going to work for Dayton home builder Don Huber. He was deeply committed to Civil Rights and providing housing for African Americans. Huber decided to build a new community and hired landscape architect Gerwin Rohrbach to direct its planning. I became Rohrbach's assistant which gave me a front-row seat to rezoning almost 5,000 acres of farmland, the submission of HUD Title VII applications, and the preparation of one of the first Environmental Impact Statements (Steiner, 1981). Many of the leading architects and landscape architects in the United States were interviewed to do the master plan for what was then called Newfields, including Harry and Ben Weese of Chicago, the Simonds Brothers of Pittsburgh, The Architects Collaborative from Cambridge, Massachusetts, Omniplan from Texas, Hideo Sasaki's partner Stuart Dawson, also from Cambridge, and Gyo Obata and Neil Porterfield of HOK in St. Louis.

The interviewees were all men and, except for one Japanese American, white. There was a bit of geographic diversity. One of my jobs was to meet the potential master planners at the Dayton airport in Trotwood and give them a tour of the Newfields site, which was nearby the airport. I had been tasked with taking pictures of the site, which was bucolic, rolling farmlands. As a result, with the exception of Huber and Rohrbach, I probably knew the land better than anyone else on the growing development team. When driving Harry and Ben around in my VW bug, a hippie couple stood up naked in a cornfield. Harry observed to his brother, "that's not something you'd see in Chicago."

When I think about my own white privilege, my work for Huber was certainly an occasion of heightened self-awareness. As a young man from a working-class neighborhood in a then mid-sized, manufacturing city, this exposure to a cross-section of the nation's leading designers opened many doors. The opportunity was made possible by two men with German surnames who saw nothing unusual with someone with the nickname "Fritz." The HOK team, which added an African-American consultant, was selected to prepare the Newfields master plan. Harry Weese was slated to design the first civic building.

In 1972, I became a bit player in a major political controversy involving political donations by Huber to the Nixon election campaign, as all the HUD Title VII new communities, save one, were sliding into bankruptcy. I was on the right side of the issue, but suddenly unemployed. I had made up my mind to go to the University of Pennsylvania to study with McHarg but, in the interim, I decided to enter the University of Cincinnati Master of Community Planning (MCP) program. Independent from any college or school at the time, the MCP program was very advanced in promoting equity and social justice, with several Black faculty and

people of color making up half the students in each class. The curriculum emphasized social activism, citizen participation, and organizational development. In addition to these subjects, I continued to take courses in the more design-oriented undergraduate DAA urban planning program.

I met McHarg for the first time in the Spring of 1974. He was the keynote speaker at a national civil engineers' conference in downtown Cincinnati. After he finished telling the engineers about the pleasure he had as a commando during the Second World War blowing up their work and receiving a standing ovation, I waited in line to introduce myself and tell him about my plans to transfer to his Master of Regional Planning (MRP) program at Penn. He asked if I had taken ecology and geology, prerequisites for the MRP program. As a design major, I had not. McHarg advised me to finish the MCP and take ecology and geology at Cincinnati where tuition was lower than at Penn.

In addition to taking the Penn prerequisites, I completed a valuable MCP internship. I worked as a community organizer for Catholic Social Services across the Ohio River in Covington, Kentucky. I was engaged in two major projects. First, I helped protect a neighborhood of handsome brick homes built by German immigrants in the 19th Century. One threat came from a mob-connected liquor store proposal that would have destroyed several historic homes, exacerbated traffic problems, and threatened the safety of a nearby elementary school. We won. Second, I worked with a group of mainly women to catch a rapist. The leader was Jeannine Gay VanDerVeer, the great granddaughter of Union General Ferdinand VanDerVeer. A co-founder of the Licking Riverside Neighborhood Association, Jeannine had been a Playboy Bunny who helped organize the Bunny's union. She was a dynamic, skilled organizer and the rapist was caught. In between organizing, I wrote a MCP thesis on the Dayton Newfields new community project which became my first book.

I visited Penn's Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning. Hoping to see McHarg again, I was directed to the four-floor studio in Meyerson Hall, where I was asked if I could draw. When I answered affirmatively, I was given a green magic marker and began working on a vegetation map of somewhere in New Jersey. The creative energy was magnetic.

McHarg's basic idea was that we should use ecological knowledge to guide design and planning. Ecology involves the relationships of all organisms, including us, to one another and our environments. Aldo Leopold observed that one of the pitfalls of an ecological education was that one sees "the wounds" of the world (1953, p. 67). Meanwhile, Paul Sears called ecology a "subversive science" (1964, p.11).

The first studio for Penn landscape architecture and regional planning students, LARP 501, focused on McHarg's method. An interdisciplinary team of designers and planners, plus environmental and social scientists taught us how to read landscapes from rocks to people. At the time, McHarg was trying to advance his method through human ecology. As a result, LARP 501 added more attention to understanding human settlement through ethnography.

Two reasons why McHarg's method was popular among practitioners were that it was replicable and also legally defensible. On many of his early projects, McHarg had collaborated with his colleague Ann Louise Strong, a Yale-educated attorney and scholar (see Strong, 1971, 1975, and 1979). Her environmental law course was the best course I ever took.

After Penn, I became an academic, accidentally. I had wanted to become a practitioner, but the mid-1970s were challenging economically. I had applied to one of the many academic jobs on the billboard outside the LARP office in Meyerson Hall. Washington State University called when I was waiting to hear about an opportunity at the National Park Service. I declined initially, but the faculty member on the other end of the call asked if I had ever been to the Pacific Northwest (no) and did I know anyone there (yes, my brother who had been taken to Washington by the Army). So, I went, fell in love with the place, and joined the WSU faculty in 1977. WSU was just starting programs in landscape architecture and regional planning.

WSU helped establish a pattern with four features that has repeated itself ever since: helping to start new landscape architecture programs, becoming involved with students and colleagues in real-world projects, reflecting and writing about those experiences, and opening myself to international opportunities.

Many landscape architecture programs gave birth to the early academic programs in city planning, including those at Harvard and the Universities of Illinois and California-Berkeley. As a result, I felt good to give back. In the Palouse, I became involved in farmland preservation and soil conservation and wrote about that experience. I also was honored to receive a research Fulbright Fellowship to The Netherlands to study new town planning and land reclamation.

During this time, I decided that a Ph.D. would be wise to further my academic career. So I returned to Penn, where I coordinated the LARP 501 studio with McHarg. I asked Ann Strong to be my dissertation advisor who guided me to soil conservation policy in the Palouse and beyond.

And so, this pattern repeated itself in Colorado and Arizona, to Rome, then Texas and China, and now back at Penn. I look back and take pride as much in what I helped to prevent, such as that Covington liquor store, as what I helped to create, including many improvements to campuses where I have worked.

I wanted to be a practitioner but became an academic. Soon after arriving in Pullman, Washington, the benefits of being an academic practitioner became evident. In contrast to being an employee in a firm or an agency, I could select the projects. In return, I was obliged to reflect and to write. Fair enough.

I have been fortunate to work with many neighborhoods and communities, cities, regions, megaregions, states, and federal agencies. I have been engaged in bi-national projects and my writings have had international reach. Because I began at the land-grant university in a rural region, I took on issues like farmland protection, soil conservation, Native-American lands, watershed planning, and small-town development. When I moved on to Denver, Phoenix, Austin, and back to Philadelphia, urban growth management, urban design, urban ecology, and infrastructure became more prominent. Along the way, I have been involved on both stopping bad ideas that would have negatively affected people as well as designs that have had tangible benefits, such as a bikeway between Pullman and Moscow, Idaho, and campus planning and design for UT Austin and Penn (Steiner, 2018). Meanwhile, I have continued to work on methods for land suitability analysis such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Land Evaluation and Site Assessment system (Steiner et al., 1994) and the Sustainable SITES Initiative (Steiner 2020).

Okay, so what does this ramble down memory lane have to do with the future? We are only relevant if we take on real issues that matter to people.

LOOKING FORWARD

The pandemic and the associated economic collapse, the bright light on social injustice and inequities, and the out-of-control warming of our planet illustrate a profound need for better planning in this first urban century. As I learned from Ann Strong, the core justification for planning in the United States is to protect the public's health, safety, and welfares. Similar legal premises exist in other nations. We should leave the world a better place, not worse, than we inherited it. This requires wisdom, which should not be a challenge for a species who named itself "wise," although we have not yet lived up to that billing thus far.

To address today's challenges and those of the future, planners should re-engage with design, understand ecology, and consider landscapes. Although the planning field evolved largely out of the design disciplines, the relationships have been rocky. Many planners incorrectly view architects and landscape architects as insensitive to people, especially those who are marginalized in some way. Although, certainly, we all could do a better job with equity and inclusion, most designers do want to make the world a better place for people and, especially landscape architects, for other species. Herbert Simon's definition for design is fitting for planning, that is, to conceive "courses of action aimed at changing

existing situations into preferred ones” (1996, p.111). Design thinking now influences diverse fields from business to medicine. A strength of design is the ability to iterate many possible solutions to a problem or opportunity.

Ecology involves the relationships of organisms, including us, with one another and our environments. Pope Francis’ recognition of human ecology and his advocacy of “integral ecology” as necessary to address social justice is instructive and potentially impactful (2015). Ecology is not static and its advances in landscape ecology and urban ecology hold considerable promise for city and regional planning (Forman and Godron, 1986; Forman, 2014; Grove et al., 2017). In broad terms, ecologists have moved beyond thinking in terms of steady states to embracing the dynamic flux of ecosystems.

Landscapes represent the intersection between natural and cultural systems. Anne Spirn illustrates that landscapes possess languages that can be read (1984) and this is true for urban places as well as areas outside of city limits (1998). Planners who are able to read landscapes can understand their histories and potentials. The word originated in the Dutch language and planners in the Netherlands have done an admirable job employing design and planning to advance the quality of life and safety of their nation.

So how might the major issues of our times be addressed through the lens of design, ecology, and landscape?

Medical science ended the pandemic and public policy facilitated the economic recovery (some wishful thinking). There has been considerable speculation of what the post pandemic world might look like. Planners and designers can develop preferred visions for the future beyond the pandemic. For instance, we have learned how to communicate remotely more effectively and to travel by car and airplane less. What does this mean for how we shape our communities? We can iterate possible scenarios: what if a road is converted for pedestrians and restaurants here? What would that look like? What would be the consequences for nearby streets and neighborhoods?

The spread of the COVID-19 virus is a sad, yet vivid, illustration of our interrelationships with others and our environments. Before there was a vaccine, the best ways to combat the disease was to go against our nature and separate ourselves from each other and don masks. The virus is thought to have emerged in late 2019 in a Wuhan seafood market through a bat as an “intermediate host” (Montana State University, 2020). When we interact with other species, there are positive and negative consequences. We share pathogens with other species. As we destroy natural habitats of other species and reduce biodiversity, we enhance the ability of pathogens to spread and increase infectious diseases. Planners can help protect wildlife habitat and create new areas for other species to prosper.

Outdoor spaces — landscapes — have provided respite during the pandemic. Porches, balconies, backyards, neighborhood parks, walking paths, and community gardens offered escape from quarantine at home. Parks also gave us “room to roam” (McCormick, 2020). Many of us saw and felt the rhythms of nature and culture anew during the pandemic. However, access to such healing landscapes is not equal to all. We need to endeavor on expanding these benefits to everyone. We can design homes so everyone has access to a porch or balcony or rooftop terrace. We can design our communities so that everyone has a 5- or 10-minute walk to a park or walking path.

Of course, issues of social justice are much larger than access to parks. Although inequalities exist around the world, I’ll focus a bit on the United States. Planning and design have been complicit with systemic racism, in spite of many good intentions. The examples abound: urban renewal, highway design, exclusionary zoning, redlining. Certainly, there have been multiple efforts to create a more just society, such as the HUD Title VII new community program back in the 1970s. As with the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, the Black Lives Matter movement galvanized attention on one of our nation’s original sins: the enslavement of Black people (and its continuing consequences). The genocide of indigenous people was our other founding sin. Solutions to systemic racism lies beyond the disciplines of planning and design; white people in particular need a change of heart, a reckoning with the past, and a commitment to positive change. When this is done, planning and design can be helpful. Social equity will involve the reordering of the built world: homes, schools, businesses, roads and rail lines, sidewalks, parks, factories, and hospitals.

Pope Francis’ “integral ecology” (2015) links social justice and ecological integrity. In the first papal encyclical on ecology, he expressed “a broader understanding of the beauty and complexity of nature, on which humans fundamentally depend” (Tucker and Grim, 2015, p. 38). Abused environments are home to vulnerable and poor people. If we value and enhance the services provided by ecosystems, all people benefit, especially those most in need.

Vulnerable landscapes display the triumphs and disappointments of everyday life. To advance social justice, such places should be appreciated and preserved. Many ordinary places — barber shops, beauty parlors, a bridge, motels, restrooms — played essential roles in the advancement of Civil Rights. Many Black burial grounds and churches need attention and renewal. The National Museum for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, does much to advance our realization that ordinary places were the sites of terrorizing and lynching of Black people for decades.

Climate change looms above all else as the existential threat in the Anthropocene. As the planet warms and the seas rise, storms, floods, and climate fires threaten especially the poor, the elderly, and the disabled. Planners have been, and will continue to be, engaged in designing both responses for adaptation and mitigation. Much is known about climate change and its probable effects. A challenge is how to convert such knowledge into action.

Ecological science can be a helpful resource for making connections. Take, for instance, the ecosystem services concept. These are the benefits we receive from nature without little conscious regard for their cost. Products such as drinking water, food and fiber, natural gas, oils, and plant-based medicines are regarded as provisioning services. The regulation of ecosystem processes yield benefits like clean air and water, pollination, erosion control, and climate regulation. We are supported by nature through photosynthesis, nutrient cycling, soil creation, and the hydrological cycle. Our cultures are enriched by nature through art and literature, religion, architecture, and recreation. A challenge for planners into the future is: how do we create ecosystem services rather than deplete them.

Such creation can occur in landscapes. Take planting trees, for example. Trees alone will not solve the climate challenge. The preservation of forests, especially in the tropics, and afforestation certainly can be helpful. Trees also provide many ancillary benefits, such as oxygen production, water cycling, and climate modifications. Concerning the latter, in many older U.S. cities, scars remain from the discriminatory practice of redlining. A lack of tree canopy in poorer communities when compared to wealthier neighborhoods is one such scar. As the planet grows warmer, these heat islands also contribute to many health issues. A city's landscapes reflect its inequalities. As a result, landscape interventions, such as tree planting and the reduction of asphalt surfaces, can make neighborhoods more pleasant, heathy, and equitable.

CODA

Many years ago, on the Newfields site, my boss, the crusty landscape architect Gerwin Rohrbach observed, "the farmer has already figured out the best place for us to build houses. Just look where he plants corn." In the years since, I have realized just how right, and how wrong, Gerwin was.

Our challenge is to convert information to knowledge and then to use it wisely. We knew who owned that Ohio field and could see that the farmer was using it to grow corn, pending its sale to a home builder. From his knowledge about soils and development, Gerwin knew it was an efficient place to build houses. But, might it been wiser to use the land to continue to grow corn and perhaps other

crops? People need places to live and work. We also need to eat and depend on clean air and water.

All soils are not created equal. All soils are special in their own ways. One may be ideal for corn; another for saguaro and palo verde. Places are composed of abiotic and biotic phenomena. Soils occupy the intersection of the inanimate and the living. This interface feeds most of the planet. Healthy soils = healthy planet. Our responsibility is to pass on productive soils, pure air and water, diverse forests and fields, and a just society to the next generation and their children and those who follow into the future.

REFERENCES

- Carson, Rachel. 1962. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Forman, Richard T.T. and Michel Godron. 1986. *Landscape Ecology*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Forman, Richard T.T. 2014. *Urban Ecology: Science of Cities*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Grove, J. Morgan, Mary L. Cadenasso, Steward T.A. Pickett, Gary E. Machlis, and William R. Burch Jr. 2017. *The Baltimore School of Urban Ecology: Space, Scale, and Time for the Study of Cities*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Leopold, Luna B., editor. 1953. *Round River: From the Journals of Aldo Leopold*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- McCormick, Kathleen. 2020. "Room to Roam." *Land Lines* (October 7).
- McHarg, Ian L. 1969. *Design With Nature*. Garden City, New York: National History Press/Doubleday.
- Montana State University. 2020. "SARS-CoV-2 Background & Origins." <https://www.montana.edu/diseaseecologylab/covid19blog/sars-cov-2-background-origins/index.html>.
- Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato si'* (Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father on Care for Our Common Home.) Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Sears, Paul. 1964. "Ecology —A Subversive Science." *BioScience* 14(7): 11-13.
- Simon, Herbert A. 1996. *The Sciences of the Artificial* (3rd edition). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Spirn, Anne W. 1984. *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design*. New York: Basic Books.
- Spirn, Anne Whiston. 1998. *The Language of Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Steiner, Frederick R. 1981. *The Politics of New Town Planning: The Newfields, Ohio Story*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

- Steiner, Frederick R. 2018. *Making Plans: How to Engage with Landscape, Design, and the Urban Environment*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Steiner, Frederick R. 2020. "Landscape Governance: The Prospects for the SITES Rating System." *Socio-Ecological Practice Research*.
- Steiner, Frederick R., James R. Pease, and Robert E. Coughlin, editors. 1994. *A Decade with LESA: The Evolution of Land Evaluation and Site Assessment*. Ankeny, Iowa: Soil and Water Conservation Society.
- Strong, Ann L. 1971. *Planned Urban Environments: Sweden, Finland, Israel, The Netherlands, France*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Strong, Ann L. 1975. *Private Property and Public Interest: The Brandywine Experience*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Strong, Ann L. 1979. *Land Banking: European Reality, American Prospect*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tucker, Mary Evelyn and John Grim. 2015. "Integrating Ecology and Justice: The New Papal Encyclical." *Solutions* (July-August): 38-43.