TOWARD A CULTURE OF DIVERSITY

Politics in the Urban Ecosystem

By Alexander Wilson

THE GRANITE GARDEN: Urban Nature and Human Design

by Anne Whiston Spirn

CITY FORM AND NATURAL PROCESS

by Michael Hough

THE EDIBLE CITY

RESOURCE MANUAL

by Richard Britz, et al

COMMUNITY OPEN SPACES:
Greening Neighborhoods Through Community Action and Land Conservation

by Mark Francis, Lisa Cashdan and Lynn Paxson
(Cowles, California, Island Press, 1984)

STRUGGLE FOR SPACE: The Greening of New York

by Tom Fox, Ian Koeppel and Susan Kellman
(The Granite Garden: Neighborhood Open Space Coalition, 1985)

COMMUNITY GARDENING IN METRO TORONTO

by Eddie Chee, Glenn Monroe and Rhonda Reed
(Toronto, Ontario Public Interest Research Group, 1985)

Six recent books engage many of these issues in talking about the look and feel of our contemporary cities. The Granite Garden and City Form and Natural Process come at the present urban (and global) crisis from similar positions. Anne Whiston Spirn and Michael Hough are both landscape architects, and both were once students of Ian McHarg, whose book Design with Nature was a much-needed intervention in modern landscape practice in the late sixties. Spirn teaches at Harvard; Hough works and teaches in Toronto.

In The Granite Garden, Spirn reviews "what the natural sciences have to say about the urban ecosystem. She suggests that air, water, earth, plants and wildlife (including Homo sapiens) are interdependent in ways far more complex and far-reaching than our everyday lives would suggest. The city, in short, is part of nature rather than its opposite. Understanding it requires the kind of comprehensive knowledge (and way of thinking) that our cities need. The book is an attempt to create that knowledge, and the one that we need to conserve the urban environment for the use of all of us.

In City Form and Natural Process, Michael Hough uses the language of natural sciences to describe the city as a "living" organism, a "natural" system that is not separate from the surrounding environment. He argues that the city is a "living" system, and that its design and form should reflect that. The book is a guide to the design and form of the urban environment, and it is aimed at architects, planners, and urban designers.

The Edible City is a resource manual that provides information on how to grow food in an urban setting. It is aimed at individuals and communities who want to grow their own food and be more self-sufficient. The manual includes information on how to choose the right plants, how to grow them, and how to harvest them.

Community Open Spaces: Greening Neighborhoods Through Community Action and Land Conservation is a book that focuses on the importance of community open spaces in urban areas. It argues that these spaces are essential for the health and well-being of the community, and that they should be designed and managed by the community. The book includes case studies of successful community open spaces.

Struggle for Space: The Greening of New York is a book that focuses on the struggle for open space in New York City. It describes the efforts of a group of activists to create green spaces in the city, and it includes case studies of successful projects.

Community Gardening in Metro Toronto is a book that focuses on community gardening in Toronto. It includes information on how to start a community garden, and it includes case studies of successful gardens.

All these books are important contributions to the debate about the future of our cities, and they are all highly recommended reading.
about the magnitude of their use: millions of metric tons of pesticides are applied on Canadian soil every year by home gardeners and by farmers. Hough’s analysis of the energy implications of this use is a brave and innovative attempt to force the importance of the issue into the headlines. The analysis is also far more complex and useful than the usual drivel about toxic chemicals that appear in the media. It is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on the energy implications of our technological society.

In the end, Hough’s analysis is an exercise in ecological determinism. It is a call to action, a call to think about the way we use our resources and the way we live our lives. It is a call to think about the future of our planet and the future of our society. It is a call to think about the way we use our resources and the way we live our lives. It is a call to think about the future of our planet and the future of our society.
Living With Lead was a group show of photographs at Gallery 44 in Toronto by seven photographers who are concerned about the impact on the environment of airborne lead. Concentrating on the area around Toronto Refiners and Smelters on Niagara Street, the exhibition approached the subject from various angles.

The Niagara community itself is made up of varied textures of low-income families and young professionals, commercial industries and new developments. There has been an increasing awareness in the community of environmental and health effects of low level exposure to lead. Since 1973, residents in the Niagara neighbourhood have been concerned about Toronto Refiners and Smelters' lead emissions and have been pursuing suitable measures to ensure safe levels. Through the Niagara Neighbourhood Association a committee and two researchers have been actively educating themselves and the community about the current situation, in which airborne lead levels periodically exceed legal limits.

Progress in all these areas has been slow in Canada, although some recent work is encouraging. Research by City Farmer, a Vancouver organization with four demonstration gardens, concludes that 80 percent of all Canadians live on fertile soil in urban centres, and that we can produce all our food within the city. The Ontario Public Interest Research Group has just published a handbook on Community Gardening in Metro Toronto. The draft I saw last summer had good advice on neighbourhood cooperation, fundraising and basic bio-intensive techniques. I would like to have seen more of an emphasis on how neighbourhood production of food can be integrated into the local economy. I was also disappointed to see that farm animals were discouraged — this is in line with Toronto's regressive 1981 bylaw prohibiting urban animal husbandry. This only encourages one-dimensional agriculture and a further reliance on food transactions to feed us.

The struggle for urban space isn't only happening around the production of food of course, although food is a particularly rich site for a new politics. In many cities, the struggle coalesces more generally around open space. Both Struggle for Spatial and Community Open Spaces emerge from New York City, where the conjunction of real estate speculation, shrinking municipal budgets, insurance fraud and other assaults by capital have produced 2000 acres of vacant private land, and many more acres of abandoned or ill-kept parkland. (The space is there in most cities: 53 percent of Liverpool's centre is vacant, while in Toronto 2500 acres are given over to the single use of utility rights-of-way.) People in New York and elsewhere are taking over these spaces for quite a variety of neighborhood parks, community gardens, places to play games — varying from one neighbour- hood to another depending on what else is available nearby. Today, a third of all parks in New York City are community parks. There are urban farms on squatted land in central London. In the Netherlands, municipalities help people close off their streets to cars. In Oslo every resident is assured a garden plot in or adjacent to the city. In Italian cities there are squatters on the borders of working class neighbourhoods, along rail lines and streambanks. These projects have a genesis in all kinds of other movements, some dating from the sixties, others not: people's parks, the playgrounds movement, the large world-wide squatting movement. All of them have succeeded in claiming a non-consumerist urban terrain.

How you actually get the land differs from place to place, but there are a few things we can learn from the New York experience. The Neighborhood Open Space Coalition, who published Struggle for Space, an intelligent history and inventory of the 450 community open spaces in New York, has explored the alternatives to squatting where people feel long-term security is important. The city government has occasionally allowed for the non-competitive sale of city land to neighborhood groups and land trusts who make open space proposals. Then you have to push for property tax exemption. The success the Coalition has had raising corporate funds reminds us of the declined status of American public agencies, but doesn't suggest a way out of the corporate economy in the long term. The book concludes that ensuring future community access to land is the critical problem urban activists face today.

All of these projects are obviously only a beginning. There are many tactical questions to be engaged, and we'll have our share of defeats. But in the not-to-long term, the imperatives are obvious. Like our civilization, our cities today are increasingly vulnerable. One last example: the City of Toronto plans just four species of trees out of the hundreds adapted to this climate. A recipe for extinction. If our cities are to survive as anything other than elaborate museums of the human species, there's lots of work to do. It means (re)making cities that are biologically and culturally diverse, plural, heterogeneous, where at every point in the complex structure of life there are choices.

Alexander Wilson is a Toronto journalist and practicing horticulturist. He is currently writing a book with Susan Wilks on the idea of nature in contemporary popular culture.