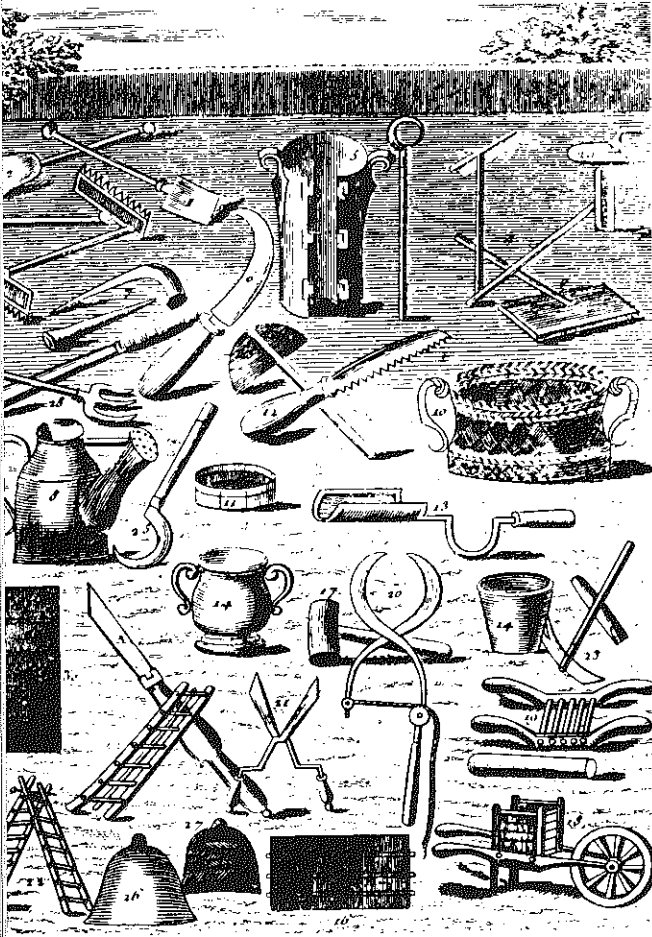


TOWARD A CULTURE OF DIVERSITY

Politics in the Urban Ecosystem

By Alexander Wilson



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REVIEWS

A I R
 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 is part of nature rather than its antithesis

THE GRANITE GARDEN: Urban Nature and Human Design

by Anne Whiston Spirn
 (New York, Basic Books, 1984)

CITY FORM AND NATURAL PROCESS

by Michael Hough
 (New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1984)

THE EDIBLE CITY RESOURCE MANUAL

by Richard Britz, et al
 (Los Altos, California: William Kaufmann, Inc., 1981)

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

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

STRUGGLE FOR SPACE: The Greening of New York

by Tom Fox, Ian Koeppel and Susan Kellam
 (New York, 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)

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"City, My Centre" goes the jingle for the Eaton Centre in Toronto. Yet as most people here and elsewhere have found out, malls are private property, and if you're not there to buy or eat, you have no meaning. As urban development charges ahead everywhere, more and more of the space of our cities is being claimed by the private sector, threatening the pleasures and transgressions of our unofficial cultures. At the same time, there's plenty of resistance. There's a defence of traditional public spaces like sidewalks and plazas and parks from conversion to condos and expressways. There are also grassroots movements trying to wrest official space — both public and private — away from landowners and bureaucracies in an effort to restore the city to its neighbourhoods and communities.

This struggle for urban space has been going on for a long time of course — centuries even. But the deepening social ecological crisis lends things a new urgency, and suggests really quite different criteria for thinking about how to make cities that will survive us.

By social ecological crisis, I mean simply that access to clean air and water, nutritious foods, housing, and energy — in short, good health — is becoming daily more limited while the institutions and relations we usually think of as social are in similar disarray. The new politics which is everywhere emerging in response to this crisis draws on thinking in the natural sciences, feminism, anthropology, and cultural theory in order to understand the interrelationships of culture and nature.

A politics of the earth is by now quite well developed. The coalition among environmentalists and native Indians on Meares Island in BC, or among farmers, feminists, environmentalists and the left at Narita Airport outside Tokyo are two recent examples of the sophistication of our resistance to the degradation of the planet. The lessons of an ecological politics are no longer being ignored by people working in the social and cultural spheres (and in fact those distinctions make less sense every day). Bioregionalism, for example, is an ecological principle that serves as a model for building local, democratic and self-reliant human communities. The paradigms of species diversity, sustainability and cooperation we find in the natural world have obvious cultural and economic applications. We have a lot of sweat equity in the social alternatives we've created in the last 20 years, and I'm convinced their survival now depends on the establishment of autonomous communities that are linked — theoretically and practically — to the land.

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 landscaping 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 antithesis. Underneath the asphalt, in the lanes behind offices buildings, on rooftops and in cracks and crevices and ravines, the cycles of nature continue despite the massive and impatient interruptions of humans. But Spirn says we already know all this, and that our technologies are equal to the task of righting our relations with the non-human world. She might be right in both respects, but a fundamental point is missed here. Setting aside the insoluble question of whether or not it's "too late", I'm afraid our technology won't help until we're able to transform our "abiotic" culture — our conviction that humanity stands outside of all (other) biologic process. (See John Livingston's *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation* for a brilliant discussion of culture and ecology.)

In any case, when we think of urban nature as including everything beyond what we set off as parks and gardens, we find it thriving under the harshest conditions. It's these landscapes of abandoned parking lots, old railway lands and vacant industrial sites that Michael Hough says we ought to emulate in our urban design work. He calls them vernacular landscapes, and they are far more productive than the pedigree landscapes we impose on the urban ecosystem. City landscapes ought to feed us, modulate extremes of temperature, harbour wildlife, conserve and purify our water, as well as make space for recreation. Yet contemporary landscape design provides mostly for the latter, and that poorly. A lawn with a strategically placed blue spruce signifies leisure and well-being — and, distantly, some sort of connection with the rest of the earth — but to do that it requires an all-out military regime of mowing, feeding, watering and dousing with biocides.

Hough's argument rests on the premise that the city is the locus of huge energy resources, most of which are wasted. These include rich soil, sewage and other organic "wastes", leaf litter and heat. We usually think of these things as garbage or by-products, yet they're precisely the resources a sustainable society needs. Mowing any grass means that it's going to need lots of water, which has to be shipped in from a distance and "purified" at great expense; petrochemical fertilizers are made from natural gas and phosphorus deposits often located halfway around the world; herbicides and insecticides also come from petrochemicals, and we're just now getting a sense of their carcinogenic legacy 30 years after their introduction. (And let's be clear

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about the magnitude of their use: more tonnes of pesticides are dumped on Canadian soil every year by home gardeners than by farmers.) Hough's analysis of energy in the urban landscape has far-reaching implications. After all, a flourishing petrochemical industry has come to require a nuclear arsenal to protect foreign hydrocarbon deposits. This suggests in turn an analysis Ivan Illich makes: the more energy-intensive a society, the less democratic.

Hough sets out by calling for an "ecological determinism" in urban design, and argues convincingly for its potential economies. For example, it costs one dollar a gallon to pump secondary effluent onto agricultural lands, where the ordinary biochemical processes of the soil remove nutrients for plants and discharge purified water to the water-table. Traditional sewage treatment, on the other hand — the kind we're still building today in industrial society — costs six times this figure, and ends up dumping high concentrations of nutrients into waterways, thus degenerating fish habitats.

Spirn and Hough call for the integration of nature into the urban economy: the "city" must stop consuming the "country" and produce for its own needs; urban agriculture has to make its way into the food distribution economy; an extensive and regenerating urban forest ought to be selectively harvested for lumber and firewood; rather than truck in our food from hundreds or thousands of miles away, we should grow much of it here using intensive organic agricultural techniques, solar greenhouses and fish ponds. Examples abound: the cities of Shanghai and Beijing are self-sufficient in vegetables, and nearly so in fish. During World War II, Canadian cities produced much of their own meat, dairy products and vegetables.

Secondly, urban land has to be converted to multiple rather than single use. At present, school yards can only be used for playing games, parks only for recreation, etc. (And let's recall here that 40 to 60 percent of urban space is given over exclusively to the private automobile.) Just as monoculture is being challenged by radical farmers, single-use urban planning is under attack by city dwellers. Part of the legal struggle on the Toronto Islands, for example, has to do with the fact that the islanders are living in a municipal park, and according to traditional wisdom, parks are incompatible with housing. But the islanders are certain of the ecological sense of their community and of their social needs: today they're appropriating that park by planting windbreaks and orchards. Urban open space must play a role in the health, safety and welfare of the community. A tree is not only a pretty object; it also filters the air, absorbs noise and heat, controls erosion, shelters and feeds wildlife, slows the evaporation of groundwater and replenishes the organic content of the soil. It is part of life process.

So yes, it is possible to reorganize our cities along ecological lines. In the 19th century, the urban sanitation crisis was recognized and solved. But how do we go about resolving the broader urban crisis of today? For Spirn, it's a matter of the appropriate agencies and institutions applying the technical knowledge skillfully summarized in books like hers. She calls for a "single coordinating agency" to integrate the work of architects, urban planners, social scientists, civil engineers, landscapers and agronomists. This gives me the willies. So does her easy assumption that all we

need is the information — when with each passing day information is becoming more of a commodity than a resource. For Hough, these practical political questions are largely passed over, despite his occasional references to citizen-initiated urban projects.

Yet I'm convinced that if any of these changes are to happen, we're going to have to initiate them ourselves at the grassroots and community level. To talk about a transformation of the physical world without also raising questions about social relations, about the state, about democracy, doesn't make much sense. For example: what good will it do if we work closer to home (or even at home) as Spirn suggests — thus saving energy, reducing pollution, and so forth — if work is still a boring and atomized activity divorced from play and spontaneity?

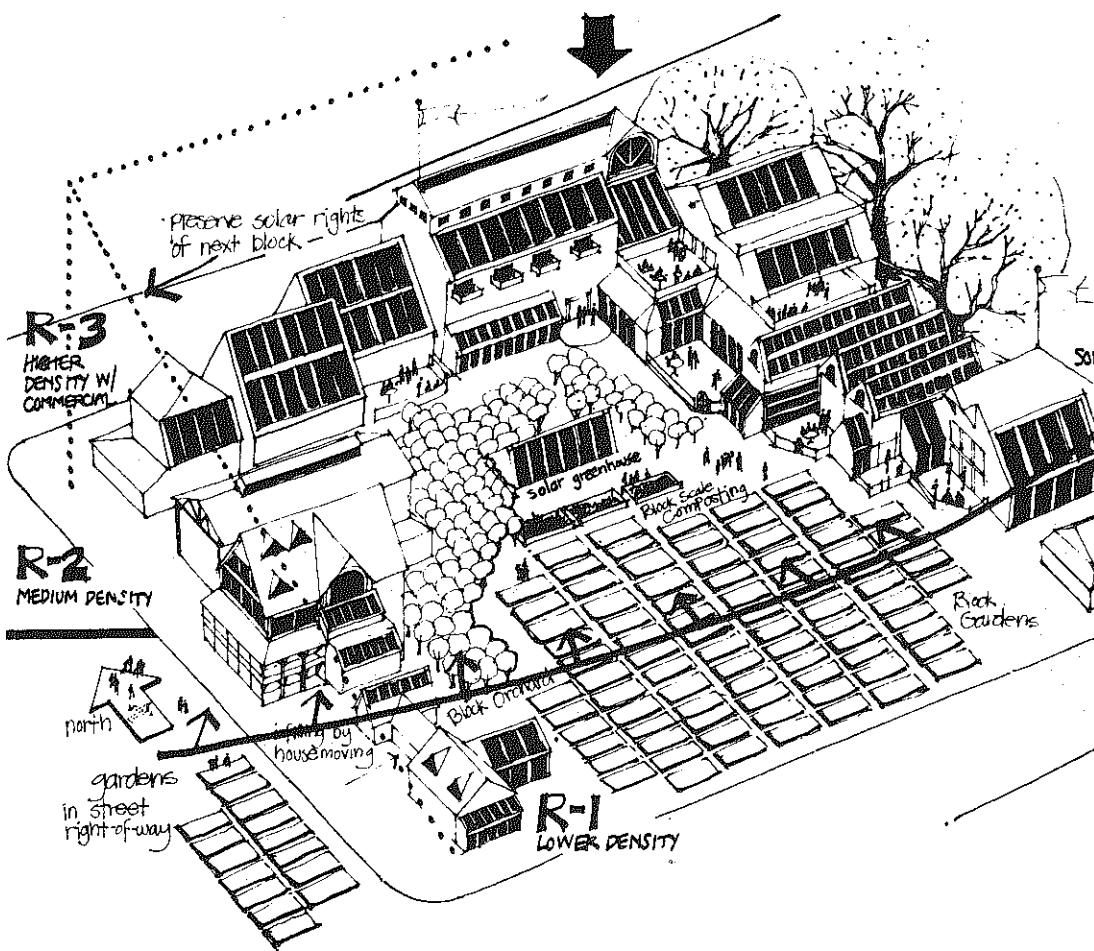
A good introduction to a community-initiated ecological politics is Richard Britz, et al, *The Edible City Resource Manual*. The book focuses on what might be called a micro-geopolitics of food. Britz is an architect who used to live in Eugene, Oregon, a small western American city where a lot of the ideas in this book have been applied. The book begins with a brief overview of agricultural production since the Second World War: between 1960 and 1976, 1400 farms folded every week in the US. Fifty corporations now control 90 percent of food industry profits and produce 75 percent of all American advertising. Five million acres of prime North American farmland is lost every year to development. The industrial farming practised on most of what's left is destroying the earth; even on its own terms, productivity is off as soils are permanently depleted.

This is a very practical book about how to turn that situation around at the local level. Its broad applicability rests on a principle drawn from social ecology, a discipline that has developed alongside contemporary radical agriculture: namely, our exploitative social paradigms of imperialism, hierarchy, sexism, etc. can be found in our relations with nature. City feeds off country, humans dominate the non-human world. This thesis informs Hough's book as well, and is by now familiar to many Canadians through David Suzuki's and John Livingston's *A Planet for the Taking*. Briefly, these are Britz' imperatives: (1) Build a coalition with the disenfranchised small farmer and thus make a political link between city and country. (2) *Plant*. Plant neighbourhood gardens, edible street trees, urban farms and woodlots, local orchards, bush. (3) Make urban landscape *produce* (food, biomass — energy from plants, etc.) (4) Integrate agriculture into the urban economy. (5) Decentralize (communities, decision-making, energy supply, etc.). (6) Develop a self-reliant (bio)regionalist politics.

The Edible City originated as a wall installation. The book is full of drawings and cartoons, clunky and sometimes hard to read typography, names and addresses and references, and lots of useful information — from how to raise rabbits to how to build an efficient house. Two projects here are worth special attention. The first is the transformation of the grid plan of the typical North American city into a series of high-density block farms. Over the course of several years, backyards are joined for intensive food production, houses moved to energy-efficient clusters on the north side of the blocks, driveways remov-

ed and alternate streets planted in orchards. In Eugene, the prototype block never got off the ground because it was difficult finding compatible neighbours and the city wouldn't cooperate with zoning changes. I think part of the problem here has to do with cultural tensions around the non-cooperative nature of the "single-family home".

The other project is the school farm, and here there has been some success. In many west coast schools (and now increasingly in the eastern US), urban agriculture has been thoroughly integrated into both the school curriculum and the physical



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plant. Schools typically have a lot of land and, in some communities, it's beginning to be farmed by school kids and neighbours. (In Toronto, on the other hand, all but one school greenhouse in the city stand empty, and school lands are planted to lawns.) *The Edible City* has a good chapter on an urban agriculture curriculum, and where these projects have been able to build themselves an economy (by selling food and plants to local merchants and by looking after the school grounds maintenance) they've survived the current recession. Other projects have emerged in Eugene since this book was compiled. A neighbourhood economic development group got government funding to inventory fruit and nut trees in the city's private gardens. People were shown how to revive non-productive trees and markets were found for the produce. Another programme linked backyard food producers with local restaurants, green grocers and florists. The Association for Regional Agriculture Building the Local Economy (ARABLE) is a non-profit community-investment programme that supports the local production, distribution and consumption of food and fibre.

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EVIEWERS

Paul Till



Peter Sramek

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.

LIVING WITH LEAD

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 in line with Toronto's regressive 1981 bylaw prohibiting urban animal husbandry. This only encourages one-dimensional agriculture and a further reliance on food transnationals 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 Space* 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-kempt parkland. (The space is there in most cities: 55 percent of Liverpool 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 neighbourhood uses: parks, community gardens, places to play games — varying from one neighbourhood 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 squat farms 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 worldwide squatting movement. All of them have succeeded in claiming a non-consumerist urban terrain.

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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 neighbourhood 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 decimated 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-so long-term, the imperatives are obvious. Like our civilization, our cities today are increasingly vulnerable. One last example: the City of Toronto plants 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 mausoleums 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
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