

BEAUTY IS THE STANDARD

By David W. Orr



Traditional village north of Antananarivo, Madagascar. Photograph: Yann Arthus-Bertrand from The Earth from the Air, Thames & Hudson

We must love our children enough to design a world which instructs them towards community, ecology, responsibility, and joy.

THE SKYMALL catalogue, conveniently available to bored airplane passengers, recently offered an item that spoke volumes about our approach to raising children. For a price of several hundred dollars parents could order a device that could be attached to a television set that would control access to the television. Each child would be given a kind of credit card, programmed to limit the hours he or she could watch TV. The child so disciplined would presumably benefit by imbibing fewer hours of mind-numbing junk. He or she might also benefit from the perverse challenge to discover the many exciting and ingenious ways to subvert the technology and the intention behind it, including a flank attack on parental rules and public decency via the internet.

My parents had a rather different approach to the problem. It was the judicious and authoritative use of the word "No". It cost nothing. My brother, sister and I knew what it meant and the consequences of ignoring it. Still, I sometimes acted otherwise. It was a way to test the boundaries of freedom and parental love and the relation between the two.

The Skymall device and the word "No" both represent concern for the welfare of the child, but they are fundamentally different design approaches to the problem of raising children and they have very different effects on the child. The device approach to discipline is driven by three factors that are new to parenting in the postmodern world. It is a product of a commercial culture in which we've come to believe that high-tech gadgetry can fix human problems, including that of teaching discipline and self-control to children. Moreover, the device is intended mostly for parents who are absent from the home for much of the day because they must (or think they must) work to make an

expanding number of ends meet. And, all of our verbal assurances of love notwithstanding, it is a product of a society that does not love its children competently enough to teach them self-discipline. The device approach to parenting is merely emblematic of a larger problem that has to do with the situation of childhood within an increasingly dysfunctional society absorbed with things, economic growth, and self.

We claim to love our children, and I believe that most of us do. But we have, sheeplike, acquiesced in the design of a society that dilutes the expression of genuine love. The result is a growing mistrust of our children that easily turns to fear and dislike. In a recent survey in the USA, for example, only a third of adults believed that today's young people "will eventually make this country a better place". Instead, we find them "rude" and "irresponsible". And often they are. We find them overly materialistic and unconcerned about politics, values, and improving society. Not infrequently they are verbally and physically violent, fully adapted to a society that is saturated with drugs and violence. A few rape or kill other children. Why are the very children that we profess to cherish becoming less than likeable and sometimes less than human?

Some will argue that nothing of the sort is happening and that every generation believes that its children are going to hell; that eventually, however, things work out. Such views are, I think, fatuous, because they ignore the sharp divide imposed between the hyper-consumerism of the post-modern world and the needs of children for extended nurturing, mentoring and imagining. It's the economy that we love, not our children. The symptoms are all around us. We spend 40% less time with our children than we did in 1965. We spend, on average, six hours per week shopping, but only forty minutes playing with our children. It can no longer be taken for granted that this civilization can pass on its highest values to enough of its children to survive. Without intending to do so, we have created a society that cannot love its children, indeed one in which the expression of real love is increasingly difficult.

No society that loved its children would consign nearly one in five to poverty. No society that loved its children would put them in front of television for four hours each day. No society that loved its children would lace their food, air, water and soil with thousands of chemicals whose combined effect cannot be known. No society that loved its children would build so many prisons and so few parks and schools. No society that loved its children would teach them to recognize over 1,000 corporate logos but fewer than a dozen plants and animals native to their locality.

No society that loved its children would divorce them so completely from contact with soils, forests, streams and wildlife. No society that loved its children would create places like the typical suburb or shopping mall. No society that loved its children would casually destroy real neighborhoods and communities in order to build even more highways. No society that loved its children would build so many glitzy sports stadiums while its public schools fall apart. No society that loved its children would build more shopping malls than high schools. No society that loved its children would pave over 1,000,000 acres each year for even more shopping malls and parking lots.

No society that loved its children would knowingly run even a small risk of future climatic disaster. No society that loved its children would use the practice of discounting in order to ignore its future problems. No society that loved its children would leave behind a legacy of ugliness and biotic impoverishment.

Of course we do all these things in the belief that they are the necessary price of creating a better world for children. But at some level I believe that our children understand that such arguments are phony. I think this awareness explains what often appears to be their unfocussed anger. Our children often mirror the larger incivility and rudeness that we inflict on them. They mirror the larger self-indulgence of a society organized around machines, instant gratification, and excessive individualism. They know that mastery of, say, Shakespeare counts for considerably less in this society than making it big in sports or business or drug-dealing. They understand intuitively that the real curriculum is not what's taught in schools, but what's written on the face of the land. It is remarkable, in fact, that they are not angrier.

What would it mean to make a society that did in fact love all its children? This is, properly understood, a design problem that calibrates what we intend as parents with how we earn our living, conduct our daily lives, build homes, design communities, manage landscapes, and provision ourselves with food, energy and materials. I would go so far as to say that the well-being of children in the fullest sense of the word, not gross national product, is the best indicator of the health of our civilization. And I believe that it is the ultimate standard for ecological design. How do we design a civilization for children?

The starting point is the child itself and its need for joy, safety, parental love, play, and the opportunity to explore the wider world safely. Such awareness must begin early in life with the development of what Edith Cobb once called "compassionate intelligence" rooted in "biological motivation deriving from nature's history". The child's "ecological sense of continuity with nature" is not mystical but is "basically aesthetic and infused with the joy in the power to know and to be". Childhood is the "point of intersection between biology and cosmology, where the structuring of our worldviews and our philosophies of human purpose takes place."

Similarly, Paul Shepard once argued that mind and body are imprinted in the most fundamental ways by the "pattern of place" experienced in childhood. For Shepard, the conclusion is that children must have the opportunity to "soak in a place" and to "return to that place to ponder the visible substrate of their own personality." Conversely, the child's sense of connection to the world can be damaged by ecologically impoverished surroundings. And it can be damaged as well by exposure to violence and poverty, and even by too much affluence. It can be destroyed, in other words, when ugliness, both human and ecological, becomes the norm. Ecological design begins with the creation of places in which the ecology of imagination and ecological attachment can flourish. These would be safe urban and rural places that included biological diversity, wildness, flowing water, trees, animals, open fields, and room to roam - places in which beauty became the standard.

At a larger scale the same standard applies to the ways children and adolescents are linked to landscapes. Typical industrial era land-use patterns teach young people that:

- The highest and best use of land is for building shopping malls, roads and parking lots;
- Land has little value beyond that of utility and economics;
- Some land is expendable as land-fills and waste dumps;
- The poor live on poor land, the well-to-do live on good land;
- Roads to satisfy our cravings for mobility trump community needs;
- Lawns are merely decoration maintained by the use of chemicals and by fuels that will be exhausted in their lifetimes;
- Prime farmland is far less important than development;
- Biological diversity is less important than economic growth.

One consequence of the homogenized and utilitarian landscape is that most young people learn little about how they are provisioned and virtually nothing about better alternatives to meet real human needs. By separating how our lives are provisioned with food and energy from how we earn our keep, we have removed a great deal of ecological reality from daily experience. The things that we used to do for ourselves as competent citizens and neighbors we now purchase from one corporation or another at a considerable markup. It should astonish no one that civility, neighborliness and communities are in decline and that crime and anomie are on the rise. But when living and livelihood become too widely separated, human bonds deteriorate. People do not need each other as they once did. And when minds and landscapes are widely separated, whole categories of thought disappear, ecological competence declines, and awareness of our dependence on nature atrophies.

In an ecologically and aesthetically impoverished landscape, it is harder for children and adolescents to find a larger meaning and purpose for their lives. Consequently, many children grow up feeling useless. In landscapes organized for convenience, commerce and crime, and subsidized by cheap oil, we have little good work for them to do. Since we really do not need them to do real work, they learn few practical skills and little about responsibility. Their contacts with adults are frequently unsatisfactory. When they do work, it is all too often within a larger pattern of design failure. Flipping artery-clogging burgers made from chemically saturated feedlot cows, for example, is not good work, and neither is most of the other hourly work available to them. Over and over we profess our love for our children, but the evidence says otherwise. Rarely do we work with them. Rarely do we mentor them. We teach them few practical skills. At an early age they are deposited in front of mind-numbing television and later in front of computers. And we are astonished to learn that they neither respect adults nor are equipped with the basic skills and aptitudes necessary to live responsible and productive lives. They imitate the values they perceive in us with characteristic exaggeration.

Assuming that we can muster the good sense to solve the problem, what would we do? Part of the solution is to rejoin mind and habitat at the landscape level by reconnecting living with livelihood. This can only be done in places where a large part of our needs for

shelter, warmth, energy, economic support, health, creativity and conviviality is met locally in competently used and well-loved landscapes. To some this will sound either utopian or like a return to some mythical past. It is neither. In fact, it is an honest admission that we've tried utopia on industrial terms and it did not work. It is merely to recognize the fact that, for better or worse, the organization of our landscapes arranges our possibilities, informs our minds and directs our attention. A landscape organized for the convenience of the automobile and trivial consumption tells young people more about our real values than anything taught in school. Worse, it deflects and distorts their intelligence at a critical point in life. It is possible, however, to organize landscapes to teach usefulness, practical competence, social responsibility, ecological skill, the values of good work, and the higher possibilities of adulthood. And it is possible to restore minds to the tutorship of soils, wildlife, plants, water, seasons, and the ecology of place.

The farms, feedlots, mines, wells, clearcuts, waste dumps, and factories which provision us are mostly out of sight and so out of mind. As a result we do not know the full costs of what we consume. Ignorant of the damage we do, we leap to the conclusion that we are much richer than we really are. Ecological poverty and poverty of mind and spirit are reverse sides of the same coin. When we get the design right, however, the manner in which we provision ourselves becomes a reminder of our larger relationships and obligations. The true aim of ecological design, then, is not merely to improve the various technologies and techniques by which we meet our physical needs, but to improve the integration of the human mind with its habitat and to fit in a larger order of things. "To live," in Wendell Berry's words, "we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want."

Ecological design in its fullest measure is not just smarter management by technicians, but rather a wider awareness and visible manifestation of our awareness that we are part of a larger pattern of order and obligation.

Frank Lloyd Wright once commented that he could design a house that would cause a married couple to divorce within a matter of weeks. By the same logic it is possible to create buildings and cities so badly as to cause a culture to disintegrate socially and come unhinged from nature. Compare the architecture of the modern world with that of earlier civilizations. The ancient cities of India, Greece and Rome, for example, were planned, in Peter Wilson's words, as "representations of microcosm and macrocosm, projections of the human body and distillations of the universe". The architecture of houses and public buildings, he said, was a means to "portray to people their relation to one another as well as to important features of their environment," a kind of "diagram of how the system works." Buildings were not simply machines, as Le Corbusier would have it, but a map showing "how the individual, the various orders of groups, and the cosmos are linked and related." For all their imperfections as places and cultures, inhabitants in such cities were oriented to larger patterns.

Compare this with sprawling cities of the twentieth century that give no clue about any cosmology larger than the Gross National Product. They have become sprawling wastelands, islands of sybaritic affluence surrounded by a sea of necrotic urban tissue. For the most part, our buildings, in which we spend over 90% of our time, are poorly built. They are often made of materials that are toxic. They are often oversized and use energy and materials inefficiently. They are mostly disconnected from any discernible sense of community or any larger ecological or spiritual pattern. And what do such cities and buildings teach us? They teach us in exquisite detail that we are alone and powerless in the world, that energy and materials are cheap and can be consumed with impunity, that the highest purpose of life is consumption, and that the world is chaotic and dangerous.

Architectural design, in other words, is also a form of pedagogy that instructs us well or badly, but never fails to instruct. When we get the design of buildings and communities right, they will instruct us properly in how we fit within larger patterns of energy and materials. They will tie our affections and minds to the care of particular places. When architecture becomes a form of ecological design it promotes ecological competence and the use of local energy and materials, and creates larger patterns of order. The goal of ecological design is not merely to meet our needs within the boundaries of ecological carrying capacity, but more importantly, to inform our desires. Good design would instruct us in what we need and the terms of our existence on Earth. In other words, the systems we devise to provision ourselves with food, energy, materials, shelter and health need to constitute a larger form of education. But if these systems are designed to educate, they must give quick feedback about the consequences of our decisions and they must work at a comprehensible scale. They must be devised in ways that create competence and practical understanding. They must be resonant with our deeper needs for meaning embedded in ritual and celebration. And design intelligence and the practical competence necessary to maintain it must be faithfully transferred from one generation to the next.

Good design must also meet other standards imposed by the way the physical world works. It must result in systems that are flexible and resilient in the face of changing circumstances. Given limits to our knowledge and foresight, good design would never lead us to bet it all, to risk the unforeseeable, or to commit acts that are irrevocable when the consequences are potentially large. And it would reorient our sense of time, giving greater weight to our future prospects and to long-term ecological processes as well. It would never cause us to discount the future.

Finally, designing ecologically begins in the belief that the world is not meaningless, but coherent in ways that are often mysterious to us. Our task is to discern, as best we are able, the larger patterns and scales in which we live, and to act faithfully within those boundaries. Design, in this larger sense, is not simply the making of things but rather a striving for wholeness. At its best, ecological design is the ultimate manifestation of love - a gift of life, harmony and beauty to our children.