I am happy that there are ever more stories to tell of the magic of nature in cities. As we continue to build relationships with the cities in our Network, new cities that are considering joining, and grassroots groups pursuing their own biophilic agendas, we continue to learn about and document the magic and mystery they seek to uncover, protect and celebrate.

One of the highlights of a visit to Toronto (a city that we hope will be joining the Network soon) was a medicine walk with cultural botanist Diana Beresford-Kroeger who spoke of the magic of trees. Converging on High Park, an enthusiastic group of around fifty of us listened closely and followed her as she guided us from tree to tree, telling us about their intimate biology, as if these trees were her own relatives (and she would likely say they are).

She would likely say they are). The attention received by German Forester Peter Wohlleben and his popular book, The Hidden Life of Trees (a book I have been assigning in my Nature + Cities class), has certainly helped to broaden our view of trees. A crop of younger forest ecologists, including Annie Desrochers of the University of Quebec and Suzanne Simard of the University of British Columbia, are also adding much to our knowledge of these hidden lives. A group of European tree researchers has been using laser scanning to detect the overnight drooping of tree limbs and the new understanding that trees actually ‘sleep.’ Trees were always mysterious but we are learning more as we listen and walk along with people like Beresford-Kroeger.

High Park is one of the last remaining places in Toronto where a Black Oak Savanna can be found. It is a place where the city undertakes prescribed burns each year to mimic natural fires that would have taken place on the prairie. These are healing places, Beresford-Kroeger tells us, where miraculous biology is a daily occurrence.

Unfortunately, the magic of places like Toronto’s Black Oak Savanna is not equally or evenly enjoyed. There are profound and deep inequities in the distribution of nature in cities, and that is the special theme of this issue of the Biophilic Cities Journal, and indeed an essential part of the vision and movement of biophilic cities. The natural magic of our cities -- their forests and parks, the birds and living creatures that animate them -- are key to our health and wellbeing. But access to that magic is variable and often unfairly distributed.

Many of the stories to follow will highlight the successes cities are having in committing to a just nature. The stories of Cully Park, in Portland, and Trillium Park in Toronto, are inspiring and show that it is possible to share power, to design inclusively, and to deeply engage underserved communities and neighborhoods of color. Both Trillium and Cully Parks show that it is possible, indeed essential, to connect to the deeper past, creating spaces and places together with the native peoples who were the original owners and stewards of these lands, and in the process working to heal some of the loss and disjuncture that are so prevalent.

Biophilic Films

I experienced the magic of Cully Park as part of our continued production of Biophilic Films. 2018 saw the release of our documentary film Ocean Cities, screened at the Virginia Film Festival in November. This film is partially about the stories of magic in the marine environments around cities like New York and Baltimore and San Francisco. The film explores both the dangers and delights of proximity to water: the desire to connect with water and all the mystery it holds, but also to adapt to and plan for the reality of sea level rise and coastal flooding, but ideally in ways that can actually make a city more biophilic.
vignettes demonstrate the variety of impressive work underway in cities and the extent to which creative design and planning can make a difference, as well as the incredible sense of magic that the discovery and celebration of local nature can imbue into our daily lives. If you have not viewed them please take a few minutes to watch.

Gaining Traction

There is considerable evidence of how the vision of Biophilic Cities continues to gain impressive momentum. This is evidenced by several interesting trends we have seen. First, we continue to make progress in expanding the Network, welcoming new cities to the ranks of partner cities, including: Edinburgh, Scotland; and Panama City, Panama. This is certainly one measure of the progress we are making. Another way in which the language and vision of Biophilic Cities is being used is to frame global convevnings. In the last half-year, we have been involved in several conferences explicitly focused on the subject of biophilic cities. These included conferences hosted at the University of Greenwich in London, and at the Queens University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. An even larger example was evident in July, when the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) chose biophilic cities as one of the main themes for its World Congress. I was honored to travel there to present a keynote address to its 1,500 delegates, and to help judge a student competition.

There has been a parallel emphasis in the literature, and (at least) three difference journals -- Sustainable Earth, Sustainability, and Cities & Health -- are each organizing special issues focused on biophilic cities. There is (and will be) a growing body of peer-reviewed journal articles, and a growing number of publishing opportunities for those interested in shaping the path forward.

In addition to forward-looking research and scholarship, I believe we also need to better understand (and re-discover) the many historical precedents and examples of biophilic design and planning, including early leaders and pioneering projects that still guide and inspire. The Journal will in the future work to profile such projects, practitioners, and thought leaders that make up the stock of practice, theory and ideas, much of which we have forgotten or taken for granted.

As a first foray into this effort, in an article in the pages to follow, I document a serendipitous stop that led to interesting new insights about the heritage of biophilic design and planning. This past December, I stopped to visit Florida Southern College in Lakeland, Florida. It is an unlikely location for the largest single collection of Frank Lloyd Wright-designed buildings anywhere. This has led me to reflect anew on Wright's influence; both the deep natural connections of Wright's buildings and his design philosophy. The campus provides the opportunity to get a sense of what his biophilic design might mean at a larger scale. His original vision is a compelling one of magical buildings, like the Annie Pfeiffer Chapel, growing up between the trees of an orange grove. It is a story of lost magic, or perhaps the promise of magic returned, should support emerge for re-planting the citrus forest that was once at the center of Wright's vision for the campus.

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We believe these short films are an effective way to tell the stories of the remarkable work underway in cities, helping to bring these people, places and stories to life. These video

Resources:


