The Future of Cities is Biophilic and Inclusive: An Interview with 2018 AIA President Carl Elefante

By Stella Tarnay

Stella Tarnay: At the AIA Conference in New York you talked about a new blueprint for cities. You also talked about an architectural revolution of relevance. What was it that drew you to the city scale?

Carl Elefante: At one level it was pretty basic. We were in New York City. Having the opportunity to address architectural issues from within the living laboratory of New York and at its scale was an easy choice to make.

But there’s another aspect to it. Looking out, we have a global awakening to the importance of shaping cities to shape human culture, to shape human society, to shape the economy, to shape the environment. As you know humanity is now more than 50 percent housed in cities and by the end of the century, almost nine out of ten people are projected to live in cities. So, human destiny is tied to the shaping of our cities. We’re going to create these conditions for essentially all humanity. What are the conditions that we need to make that work? For people to survive and thrive? And frankly, architects have to stop just talking to each other.

Stella Tarnay: Tim, as a planner you’re used to thinking at the city scale. But what do you think about the role of architects for biophilic cities?

Tim Beatley: I think there’s a lot of potential. And some great individual examples. Singapore comes to mind. The Oasia highrise hotel there is a living, biophilic building in just about every sense, even though it’s not Living Building certified. It replaces ground level nature 1100 percent. That is really remarkable. Twenty one different species of flowering vines grow on its planted facade. I’ve had conversations with its designers and in particular Wong Mun Summ of WOHA, who likes to talk about designing the facade for squirrels, which is sort of funny. But he also talks about creating a living city through a network of green roofs, sky gardens, and vertical facades. When we talked last, he said to me: you planners are not thinking much in the three-dimensional way. You’re not thinking about how building design can contribute to a larger urban goal. And he’s probably right.
Stella Tarnay: At the AIA Convention, Helena Van Vliet, founder of DC’s sister project, BioPhilly, talked about the potential of cities as multi-species habitats. Where we no longer think of cities as just healthy places for people, but for multiple species in the urban environment. How does an architect’s work change when we start thinking about cities in this way?

Carl Elefante: Well first, we’re not doing a good job yet designing for the human species. We need to address that. Recognizing that we’re biological creatures, that we’re part of nature, and that we’re not better being taken OUT of nature, rather we’re better being IN nature. The second species that’s starting to be thought about is birds. Because our cities today are annihilating birds by the millions.

Tim Beatley: It’s great to see places like San Francisco adopting bird-friendly standards, so it’s out there. But I don’t see a lot of emphasis on it in the architectural curriculum, or in the profession. Not much emphasis on designing buildings with birds, and other species in mind.

Carl Elefante: So, let’s make it part of education. Education is such a good place to start. And let’s make it part of code. This is a great example of how architects can be part of the relevance revolution.

Tim Beatley: In your quite wonderful AIA talk you referenced City Beautiful, which I thought was interesting. We don’t always invoke that idea, that history. Can you elaborate on it a bit?

Carl Elefante: That reference expresses everything good and everything bad about it. It’s a bit of a cautionary tale. In the past, architects have looked in the mirror and said, our job is to make a wonderful place for everyone. Our job is to create beautiful cities. So who were those people and what was their image? They were extremely privileged with a definite sense of manifest destiny of the white man. That’s the world they came from. There were certainly some who were culturally and intellectually beyond that, but the mainstream was about the great white hope and hey, let’s put Roman columns everywhere. So that’s the cautionary tale. We are now 21st century citizens, not 19th or 20th century citizens. We don’t need to create the City Beautiful 2.0. Because that’s not the right model. Let’s find the right model. Our challenge is the same: to create cities that are wonderful places for everyone.

Tim Beatley: To quote you: “Cities that are beautiful, inspiring and joyful.” But you got your biggest applause when you talked about inclusivity, and the architectural profession rising to that challenge.

Carl Elefante: Right. AIA has actually been doing a lot of work on gender equity and equitable practice. About how we support and promote firms that are adopting equitable practice modes. AIA’s membership was energized by the Me Too movement. We were able to catch that wave and advance AIA’s equitable practice agenda. And frankly, we really need to do that.

Tim Beatley: Let me ask you more directly about biophilic cities. Can you say more about the role of nature in that future-looking vision of cities?

Stella Tarnay: And another quote from your talk that I like: “Cities as part of ecosystems, and inspired by nature.” I thought that was beautiful. What did you mean by that?

Carl Elefante: I think the move to biophilic cities is the most fundamental mode change that is required for us to create the 21st century city. I see three dimensions to it. First, people are biological creatures. We live in nature, whether it’s a built nature that people created, nature that nature created, or somewhere in between. We’re finding out more and more about how much impact people have had on their natural settings over the millennia. I mean, here we are in this historic University of Virginia landscape that is completely human-created, with natural elements. Yet it works in that biophilic way. Architects are beginning to understand, and perhaps rediscover, how that can work in places like hospital settings, for example. How to make people feel better through design.

Second, nature needs us to be thinking about it when we design our cities. We’re still in that “doing less bad” mode, when we actually need to be in a regenerative mode, to design buildings and cities that are good for the environment.
There's a lot of thinking going on about how to make cities carbon sequestering, rather than just carbon neutral. That's good. How cities can be part of the solution. Not just less of the carbon problem. We were talking about multiple species. We can design for that with green corridors. And how about better air quality cities? We can design for that. And how about better water quality cities? We can design for that with green corridors.

Carl Elefante: I think that they can be advanced at the same time, and they have to be advanced at the same time. We can’t work in silos. We can learn a lot by looking in the past, and how people solved problems regionally, in their own environments.

Tim Beatley: That reminds me in a specific way of the house I grew up in. It was designed to catch the breezes, and didn’t have air conditioning. If you got too warm, you moved to another part of the house that was cooler. That experience of thermal change was a source of sensory pleasure. We have a world where the built environment is designed so there aren’t many opportunities to experience that, to feel those sensations.

Carl Elefante: Right! The current design standard of comfort for constant humidity and temperature year-round is nuts. I don’t think it’s good for us. You know, I’m outside and it’s 95. I come inside and it’s 65. Our bodies aren’t designed for that. At the Center for the Built Environment at UC Berkeley they’ve been doing research on this and they suggest there are more like 60 data points for human comfort. You know, is there air flow, where is the airflow? Is it on your feet, is on the back of your neck? Is there radiant heat and cooling? Looking at how we function as biological beings rather than these theoretical six-foot cylinders in engineering calculations.

Tim Beatley: One of the things I like about Singapore’s Oasia building is that the lobby is open air, without air conditioning. And it works.

Carl Elefante: The three of us here, we’re in a perfect situation right now. We’re sitting on the back porch of this historic building next to garden and trees, and every once in a while the breeze picks up. I mean, it’s a delight to experience.

Stella Tarnay: I’d like to address cultural and professional connectivity. For me, as a civic organizer for biophilic practices in Washington, I have found the Biophilic Cities Network really helpful in connecting me with peers who are also innovating. I’m curious about how you think the Biophilic Cities Network can support architects who want to be active in designing for biophilic cities?

Carl Elefante: I think that it’s a missing element in the architectural discussion. It would be great to think about that through the Committee on the Environment at AIA, and some of the other committees. For example, materials, and resiliency. And design for health. But it should include biophilia as a much more central discussion rather than sort of a sub-topic of design and health.

Tim Beatley: Biophilic design does seem to be a concern for interior spaces. Looking at the numbers of articles about biophilic office space design, can we leverage that? Can we go the next step and get architects to think about the neighborhood and the city? To extend the sensibility of having nature in your office to the larger context?

Carl Elefante: That kind of indicates that you always need an economic driver. In the case of corporate offices, you have worker productivity; you’ve got people who are willing to invest capital funds into what ultimately will help them retain talent and help that talent be more collaborative and creative and productive and so on. For the same thing to be created in our cities, we need policies and programs, extending to the regional level, to support that.

Stella Tarnay: Biophilic DC is the Co-founder of Biophilic DC and Executive Director of Capital Nature, a nonprofit dedicated to bringing nature experience into the lives of Washington DC area residents and visitors. Stella can be reached at stella@capitalnature.org.

Resources:

AIA National (July 17, 2018). Architecture’s Relevance Revolution [video file]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doz-hYRkkkY.