The Natureful City
Inspiration and Optimism on the Planet of Cities

By Tim Beatley

As I reflect on some powerful lessons learned at the Earth Optimism Summit along with other events earlier this year, I find myself reflecting on optimism and the power of inspiring stories. Despair and pessimism might seem the more appropriate responses to the current global milieu, but it is hard to spend time around cities, and the remarkable people and organizations that are driving positive change in these places around the world without feeling optimistic.

Optimism is a choice, I believe, but in my case one made easier by all the inspiring stories and narratives bubbling up in cities around the world.

Optimism and inspiration are on my mind in part as a result of having recently participated in a wonderful session at the Earth Optimism Summit in Washington, D.C. It was a remarkable panel of experts and activists, moderated by John Beardsley and Jeanne Haffner of Dumbarton Oaks. The panel discussed all the wonderful ways that life can be improved, problems addressed, and connections to nature strengthened, through creative work and commitment. We heard from David Auerbach, co-founder of Sanergy, a company making toilets and franchising them for use in the slums of Nairobi, where sanitation is woefully inadequate. Each toilet becomes at once a way to enhance health and sanitation, but also to generate jobs (and to return nutrients to the farm fields of Kenya). Damon Rich, former director of Planning for the City of Newark, told the inspiring story of establishing the Newark Riverfront Park, reestablishing connections to the Passaic River, and in a parallel set of efforts the Passaic River, and in a parallel set of efforts cleaning up this highly contaminated waterway. An equally inspiring story of reconnecting to water was told by Murray Fisher, founder of the Harbor School in New York City, an innovative high school teaching harbor-related skills and professions. Fisher is also co-founder of the Billion Oyster Project, a wonderful effort to engage citizens, and especially schools in this “City of Water”, in the re-growing of an oyster ecology and culture. These are all stories of ambitious goals and visions for the future, certainly, but of tangible and remarkable change already underway in these cities.

People and organizations such as these are inspiring on so many levels: mustering commitments and energy in the face of nay-saying, tackling problems in new and untried ways (with considerable risk of failure), and marshalling support and enthusiasm for change from many others along the way. Each of these stories shows the power of passionate leadership, and the promise of scaling up from small beginnings to larger impacts. We look forward to participating in future Earth Optimism Summits and to learning about and helping to tell the stories of other remarkable cities and people.

We are similarly inspired by the work of our partner cities in the Biophilic Cities Network, and by the fact that the Network continues to resonate and grow. Over the last few months, we
have had many conversations with representatives from cities around the U.S. and the world interested in participating in the Biophilic Cities Network. These have included cities as diverse as Panama City, Panama, Atlanta, Georgia, and Bellingham, Washington.

Several new cities have joined the Network with fanfare and great enthusiasm, most recently Austin, Texas, and St Louis, Missouri. These two cities have pursued an agenda of natureful urbanism in different though complementary ways. Years ago, I filmed a segment of a documentary film, The Nature of Cities, in Austin, specifically capturing the spectacle of that city’s 1.5 million Mexican freetailed bats. One evening, we met Merlin Tuttle, founder of Bat Conservation International (BCI), in front of the Congress Avenue Bridge, where the bats reside each spring and summer, and where residents and visitors come each evening to see the bats emerge and fly-off in large columns to feed. In our interview with Tuttle, he spoke of the dramatic changes in the perception of the bats. The initial “biophobia” of fear and worry gave way to fascination and celebration following a healthy dose of advocacy and information from Tuttle and BCI. In his wonderful book, The Secret Lives of Bats, Tuttle describes Austin as “the City that Loves Bats.”

In March, I had the pleasure of delivering an evening lecture in Austin as part of their ImagineAustin lecture series. Much of the day was spent learning about the other terrific programs and initiatives underway there. A meeting was convened of city stakeholders who are working on aspects of biophilia in the city. The meeting was organized by Leah Haynie, an Environmental Program Coordinator for the city, and each attendee was asked to do a PechaKucha-style brief summary of the work they are doing. I learned a lot, but not surprisingly I think the attendees learned much as well. We heard about the new South Central Waterfront Vision Framework Plan, a plan that envisions a densifying but also greening strategy for this important section of downtown Austin. Impressively, a part of it imagines a “bat theater,” a large public square where residents will have a spectacular view of the bats as they emerge from under the Congress Avenue Bridge. We heard as well about revisions to Austin’s Land Development Code, and new efforts to support and subsidize stormwater retrofits and green streets in residential neighborhoods. Especially impressive are new collaborations around children and nature, and we heard an update on Austin’s participation in Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN), a joint initiative between the League of Cities and the Children and Nature Network, which is spotlighted in an article in this issue written by Hayden Brooks.

Especially innovative is the idea of Green School Parks discussed by Hayden Brooks, which Austin is pioneering. There are a number of places where school grounds are jointly owned by the city’s Parks Department and the School District. These are being understood as opportunities to insert and grow new nature, especially in nature-deficient neighborhoods. An equity map was developed to select school parks, to show which disadvantaged neighborhoods were most in need. A pilot school has been chosen, Barrington Elementary, and plans are being developed to turn this school into the city’s first Green School Park! It is an exciting idea, at once a creative rethinking of conventional spaces around schools (largely neglected from a nature point of view), and also a chance to at least partially remedy profound inequalities that exist in the distribution of nature in this city. This is cause for optimism, definitely.

In St. Louis, the story emerging around its affection for monarch butterflies is similar in some ways to Austin’s love of bats. The affection for this species starts with the city’s long-serving former mayor Francis Slay, who declared the goal of planting 250 butterfly gardens, under the city’s Milkweeds for Monarchs initiative. They have surpassed that goal and now planted some 370 butterfly gardens, something Mayor Slay, and his sustainability director, Catherine Werner, who has also been a major champion of the effort, can be proud of. I participated in a celebratory event at the Missouri Botanical Garden in March, along with former director and conservation hero Peter Raven. Mayor Slay was presented with the Biophilic Cities Network certificate, and city officials reported on progress in achieving the goals of St. Louis’s ambitious Sustainability Plan.

The event also saw the unveiling of the city’s new “Connecting with Nature Map,” a beautiful and highly readable guide to the nature of the city, including many parks with butterfly gardens.
The love of butterflies was everywhere apparent on that day in St. Louis. There was the celebratory cake adorned with monarchs, and they were handing out origami butterflies—a very creative sheet with detailed instructions on how to turn it into something magical.

Later that day, I went in search of some of these spaces, including a brief stop at the wonderful Brightside Demonstration Garden. The site of a former gas station, it is now a wonderful natural asset for the city, and demonstrates a number of sustainable and biophilic ideas. There are native plants throughout organized around different habitats, including glades, woodlands and prairies. Interspersed are demonstrations of permeable paving, rainwater collection, and silva cells (a technology for planting urban trees).

Spaces like Brightside are a wonderful complement to the city’s larger greenspaces, which include the quite large Forest Park, that dates back to the 1870’s (a prescient step, establishing a park even larger than Central Park in New York City). The nature remaining in this city, something true for most cities, can also be found in less obvious places. I had the chance to visit one of the last remnant pieces of native prairie, located in the Calvary Cemetery. It is sobering to realize how little of the original prairie ecosystem remains, but heartening that a unique piece of this cemetery has been set aside as a kind of ecological reference point, and a reminder perhaps of the habitat-debt that most cities have incurred. Catherine Werner, sustainability director for the city, speaks of her visit to this prairie and how it brought home the need for environmental stewardship. Even though such a spot serves to highlight what has been lost, it also serves as a beacon of hope for the future as well.

Increasingly, we recognize that inspiration comes from closely working with others with a common mission. And in this regard, we are happy to report several new partnerships that are helping to spread the Biophilic Cities message and to further inspire and energize our own work. These include co-organizing a lecture series with our colleagues at the Smithsonian Institution’s Natural History Museum in D.C., webinars with our colleagues at the Security and Sustainability Forum, and a virtual panel with our friends at The Nature of Cities, among others.

We also helped to organize and jointly convene a Biophilic Leadership Summit, held at Serenbe, a unique ecological community, near Atlanta. The Summit brought together a remarkable group of design leaders for presentations and discussions, including: Bill Browning of Terrapin Bright Green; Robin Moore of the NC State’s landscape architecture department; Julia Africa from the Harvard University School of Public Health; Richard Piacentini, Director of the Phipps Conservatory in Pittsburgh; and Ellen Dunham Jones, of the Georgia Tech School of Architecture, among many others. Steve Nygren, founder of Serenbe, was our wonderful host, sharing lessons from the ongoing development of Serenbe, and its many innovative design and planning elements. Two months earlier, Nygren delivered a wonderful lecture to my Cities + Nature class, which is now viewable as a webinar on our Biophilic Cities YouTube channel.

Serenbe’s bonafides as a biophilic community are obvious: the homes and buildings are literally surrounded by nature, and its many design details, from street lamps to signage reference nature. More surprising perhaps is the art story here, including the creation of the Institute for Art, Culture, and Environment. Funded by a one percent real estate transfer tax on the sale of homes in Serenbe (three percent in the case of the sale of lots), the extent and variety of artistic endeavors is wonderful: a visiting artists program, a film festival, and a broadway-quality set of musical productions. We had a taste of the latter as Nygren led us to the site of the remarkable outdoor theater, and we watched the second half of Grease, all taking place, as many things do in Serenbe, under the stars. The Serenbe story is a reminder of the natural fusion of art and nature, the ways that creativity of all kinds is both stimulated by contact with our natural world, and can help to deliver biophilic benefits and images in urban settings.
One of the most stimulating panels at the Summit centered on the topic of biophilic codes. It featured an overview of legal codes by JD Brown, Director of Biophilic Codes for the Biophilic Cities Project, and representatives from two cities, Atlanta and Washington, who discussed and compared their code efforts. I am encouraged by the potential of legal codes, which signal a shift from small scale experiments or demonstrations, to more systemic and jurisdiction-wide application of biophilic planning and design ideas. While these codes are not perfect, and entail lots of implementation and enforcement challenges (whether a tree protection ordinance, or dark sky lighting code, or stormwater financing standard), they do have the potential to positively impact the nature of cities.

The many profiles, stories, interviews contained herein, from Atlanta’s BeltLine to the green innovations of Medellín, Colombia, reflect this power of inspiration. Our aim in this journal is to provide a place for sharing creative solutions and urban nature stories from around the globe. It takes a global village, and while each place and setting will be different, there is much practical insight that can be be passed along from one city to another, about what works, about the most compelling and useful tools, and about how to most effectively set change in motion. But, at the end of the day, it is the all-important sense that change is possible, and that “if they can do it there, it can also happen here.”

Resources


Biophilic Cities Project. YouTube [video files]. [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCR1OKw8CA2IsK-TnEJdDflw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCR1OKw8CA2IsK-TnEJdDflw).


The Urban Assembly New York Harbor School. [https://www.newyorkharborschool.org](https://www.newyorkharborschool.org).

[Forest Bathing at the Biophilic Leadership Summit](http://www.batcon.org)

Photo Credit: JD Brown.