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Building with the Breath of Life

by Tom Bender

Throughout history, cultures have acknowledged the existence of a subtle life-force energy, or chi, underlying and connecting all material existence. The universe of chi is both new and timelessly ancient. It is a vision of the energy—rather than material—basis of all Creation, of the intimate interconnectedness of all life.

Some manifestations of this energy, as seen in cities all over the world, serve to illustrate the concepts and make us aware of the emotions that urban settings can evoke.

Most cultures, other than the contemporary Western main stream, have incorporated an understand of this breath of life into all aspects of their lives. The personal experience of this breath of life through yoga, tai chi, qi-gong, martial arts, meditation, or spontaneous occurrence is acknowledged by increasing numbers of people in our own culture.



[Itsukushima Shrine](#) consists of pavilions floating above the waters of the bay, their crimson color iridescent and shimmering in the light reflected off the water.

Photo: Tom Bender



Itsukushima Shrine is an unforgettable setting for the blessing of a fishing fleet and image of the

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A chi-centered worldview changes how we design and use places. It requires, obviously, that we give consideration to the chi of a place. The role of the sacred becomes central to our relationship with our surroundings. Buildings with soul, gardens for our spirits, and cities of passion become the goal rather than rentable square feet.

Accommodating and enhancing ritual and its role in both the making and use of places becomes important, as does being a part of the local ecological community. Low-impact ecological design is taken for granted. Growth, greed, and consumption give way to the goals of sustainability and nurturing.

Roots of Community Passions

Our minds, hearts, dreams, and emotions are vital to our cities. We often think of cities in terms of their technical and material elements, such as streets and highways, hospitals, water, sewer, electrical and communication systems, building functions, and institutions. Yet how they stir our love and passion, affect our minds, give form to our dreams, and evoke our emotions are vital elements in their power.

Sacred Land of Paradise.

Image: Tom Bender

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One element of that power is our ability to bring into being powerful and unprecedented patterns and images through grasping new potentials of a setting. The [Itsukushima Shrine](#) in Japan, instead of being built on land, was constructed on pilings in a bay. Its red-orange buildings float on their reflections in the tidal water, as the festooned fishing boats arrive thorough the giant torii gateway framing the entrance of the bay for the annual blessing of the fishing fleet.

Or think of San Francisco and the images of its bridges appearing and disappearing magically in the fog. Or Shrinigar in Kashmir, where the royalty of India created a fabulous summer retreat of gardens encircling the lake. Gardens cascade down the hillsides and float on reed mats on the lake. Communities of houseboats are connected by causeways, arched bridges, and boats floating on the mirrored surface of the lake.



The wonderful sacred and organic designs of Antonio Gaudi— parks, apartment houses, cathedrals, houses, and public buildings—have given a special flavor to the entire city of Barcelona. Photo: Tom Bender



Built as a pleasure retreat for the royalty of India to escape the summer heat, Dal

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In the Gujarat area of northwestern India, the groundwater subsides dozens of feet (hundreds of centimeters) into the ground in the months before the yearly monsoons. The local villages there developed a pattern of building "step-wells"—flights of steps giving individuals access to the water far below the surface. In bracing the walls of these stone stairways, the villages evolved a wonderful pattern of cool, shaded, carved-stone platforms and alcoves which became the village's gathering place in the hot, dry months.

The passions and driving force of single individuals like Baron Haussman in Paris, or Pierre L'Enfant in Washington, D.C., have shaped the dominant nature of some wonderful cities. The architect [Antonio Gaudi](#) gave Barcelona a unique flavor and sense of sacredness, mathematics, geometry, and color through his parks, apartment buildings, homes, and churches.

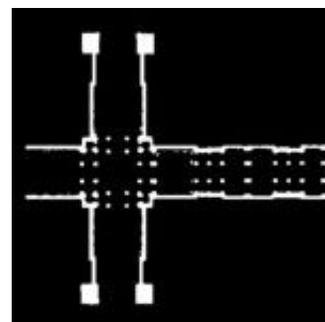
In Nikko, Japan, the funerary shrines of several of Japan's great shoguns, or military rulers, are intricately carved and gaudily lacquered, built through the coerced "contributions" of the shoguns' underlords.

But what is most striking and memorable about the shrines is their surroundings. They are approached through long graveled avenues set

Lake in Shrinigar manifests a magical vision of a community living in cool, fragrant gardens on terraced slopes. Photo: Tom Bender



Adalej Village stepwell. The solution to dry-season access to water also created a wonderful place for community, away from the heat and sun. Photo: Tom Bender



Adalej Village stepwell is revealed throughout the dry season, as the

between stone walls in a deep forest of towering Japanese cedars, which contribute great power and contrast to the buildings themselves. The trees, however, were not there originally, but were planted by one of the lesser lords, who conceived of their planting either through a stroke of genius or as a clever way to avoid paying a burdensome monetary "contribution."

water level recedes. Images: Tom Bender



What would Agra, India, be without the individual love and passions of Shah Jahan: the [Taj Mahal](#) built in memory of his wife, his own planned tomb on the other side of the river, and his palace structures in the Fort?

A riverside cafe terrace in Prague provides one of innumerable places for the residents to enjoy the beauty of their city.

Photo: Tom Bender

Yet individuals do not have to be rich or famous for their passions to give shape to a community. Simon Rodia's wonderful whimsical [Watts Towers](#) in Los Angeles, made from broken pottery and used rebar, have given identity to a whole neighborhood. Balladeer Forestiere's underground gardens in Fresno, California have become a local wonder.



The long avenues planted with towering cedars create an unforgettable setting for the Shogun shrines at Nikko.

Photo: Tom Bender

The three-foot- (90 centimeter-) thick stone walls of the Tassajara Zen Center's kitchen in California give silent testimony to the gentle persistence of faith against the unreasonableness of local building codes that demanded such overbuilding. A 40-mile (65 kilometer) loop walking trail around

Portland, Oregon, exists because of the vision and faith of a few individuals.

The citizens of the Czech capital of Prague had such a love of their community that they bribed the Germans not to destroy it in the Second World War. Prague had its share of beautiful monuments and historical structures, but the specialness of the city was in how its entire fabric had, over the years, become an expression of love for community. Through dozens of generations, the exterior of virtually every building in the city had been ornamented and enriched with sculpture, painting, and architectural decorative work—for the enjoyment of the entire community, not just the building's owners. A hodge-podge of styles, techniques, and treatments amassed over time, which sounds like a recipe for chaos. Together, however, their individuality is subsumed into an overall richness with wonderful and unexpected details anywhere we look.

Institutions can be the source and vehicle for expression of a community's passions. To most visitors, the governmental buildings of Washington, D.C., are secondary to the extraordinary collection of private and public museums that have congregated around the city's center. University towns like [Oxford](#) or [Cambridge](#) in England, Amherst



*Building with the Breath of Life has recently been published by Fire River Press.
Photo: Tom Bender*

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or Cambridge in Massachusetts, have imbued their communities with a sense of passion for academic learning. Other cities, like Jerusalem, are so prolific with institutions of various religions that the air is filled with prayers in many tongues.

It is hard to think of Spain without thinking of the rituals and passions of the bullfight and the archetypal patterns renewed in us by those celebrations. Similarly, who can think of Indianapolis without car racing; of Milan without opera; or of Rio or New Orleans without Mardi Gras?

Whenever we come together in celebration—sacred or secular—we bring into focus a vortex of energy that renews both us and the place. If well focused, it can bring healing and power to our endeavors.

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[Tom Bender](#) is an architect in Nehalem, Oregon and author of [Building with the Breath of Life: Working with Chi Energy in Our Homes and Communities](#), from which this article was excerpted. He is also author of the companion volume, [Silence, Song & Shadows: Our Need for the Sacred in our Surroundings](#).