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# CITIES OF PASSION, CITIES OF LIFE

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## FENG-SHUI

Places retain the reverberations of events long past that have occurred in them, and the cumulative patina from those events adds to the power of the place to affect our lives. Our family has stayed two summers in a house in Maine that has been in the same family for seven generations. The mark of all those lives and years, the happiness and pain, and the care or neglect of each time whispered to us out of every worn step and handrail, every coat of paint or wallpaper, every piece added, taken away or changed.

The generations in human places and the eons in natural places that constitute the history and legacy of a place surround us and put our lives and actions in a deeper context and meaning than in a place newly made. That past can give strength, or it can press us down with its weight. The accomplishments of the past can stand as monuments reminding us of what each generation can achieve, or stand as unmatchable achievements against which we can ill measure up.

To walk a path in China worn down a dozen feet into the earth by forty centuries of footsteps, or along a road in India lined with the crumbling monuments of dynasty after dynasty can limit our dreams or give them added dimension, continuity, meaning, and direction. To live in Rome, surrounded by the civic and artistic legacy of two thousand years can inspire us or dominate us. Much depends on us.

Even acknowledging our power to alter their impact, places affect us powerfully - emotionally, symbolically, and physically. They reflect the values, dreams, greatness and pettiness of their creators and users alike. And we affect our places in return - even our intentions and attitudes towards the events which occur within them alters the place itself.

Our relation to the places within which our lives are lived is more than a physical one. The spiritual traditions of many cultures speak of a particular kind of human life energy - *chi, prana, ki, kundalini* - the names are many. And many traditions speak also about the energy in a place - *feng-shui, ley lines, earth energy*. We know now that there is a demonstrable geophysical basis for much of this power of place - electromagnetic anomalies and energy fields in the earth's crust tied to the energy emissions of the sun and the earth's magnetic field, radioactivity levels, and air ionization.<sup>1</sup> And it is being clearly shown that these geophysical phenomena affect all life including the thought processes in our minds through the magnetite which is incorporated into almost every part of our brain.

What is newly being understood is that this interaction works *both* ways. Our *internal "chi"* energy impacts and alters the energy of the places we inhabit, and consequently affect others that use those places. Dowsers in England a number of years ago documented amazing correspondence between the physical configuration of various cathedrals and the patterns of earth

energy they could measure. What it appears today is that the energy fields in the building have resulted as much from the visits and energy brought *to* the place by centuries of pilgrims as from the original energy patterns of the sites.

It is now possible to use a variety of techniques including dowsing, acupuncture, computerized electrophysiology and kinesiometry to measure physiological responses to ELF (extremely low frequency oscillating magnetic fields) and other environmental stressors. We can demonstrate consistent and persisting physiological impacts from events as small as an overflight by an airplane, and lasting impact on the energy of a place from the "state of mind" of its users.<sup>2</sup>

Our surroundings are not isolated containers for our activities. Even our anger, indolence, reverence and passions are directly imparted to our surroundings through interacting electromagnetic fields, and in turn affect other present and future users of a place. Our feelings can set up a chain reaction for good or ill. The accumulated energy profile of a place can also be altered (cleansed or "exorcised" if you wish), through actions taken to counterbalance them.



## SACRED BUILDING

*The greatest failing of our architecture and cities today is the same as that of the society in which they are embedded - a failure to address the spiritual dimension of our lives. This is not the once-a-week, sit-in-church spiritual dimension of our lives, but the part that deals with the diseases of the spirit which constitute our greatest social problems.*

Look at all our intractable social problems - alcoholism, tobacco and drug abuse, crime, child and spouse abuse, homelessness, obesity, apathy, divorce and broken homes, poverty, failing schools. All

are reaching epidemic proportions. All seem resistant to resolving.

These problems, however, have a common root. They are not diseases of the body, but of our psychic "immune system". They all arise out of lack of self-worth, lack of respect by and for others, or lack of opportunity to be of use and value to family and society. These problems are all *diseases of the spirit*.

- *It is a disease of the spirit* when the weight of the successes and failures of the past lie so heavily on a person or culture that they don't want to even try to measure up either to the past, or to their own potentials.

- *It is a disease of the spirit* when wealth and comfort make us too self-satisfied to reach out for the vital nourishment of work, community, and giving to others.

- *It is a disease of the spirit* that we see in the eyes of people who have been defeated - individually or as a society - and have seen what they love and value destroyed, lost, or taken away.

Our minds are the greatest force in our immune systems and in our health. Our health depends most vitally on our spirit. Spirit is the heart of our lives, our dwellings, and our cities. The nature of our lives and our communities grow from the same inner fire.

A spiritual core to society is essential for personal and social health and survival. Simply put, that spiritual core deals with "honoring". It deals with respect, with what the Christian Golden Rule distilled into, "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*"

How do we honor each other, and ourselves? How do we honor old people, children, the sick or dying? How do we honor workers and those outside the workplace? How do we honor those going

through life's changes?<sup>3</sup> How do we honor our neighbors, our past, our communities, or our adversaries? How do we honor plants and animals; the earth, air and waters; our planet and the stars from which we are descended?

What does this mean for architecture?<sup>4</sup> Expressing a sense of honoring in our surroundings is but a small piece of a sacred world, but one which permeates and connects to everything. And it is one which constantly surrounds us with concrete images of what we value.

*Our surroundings themselves are worthy of honoring. They also act like mirrors, expressing our values and conveying to others our inner strengths and fears, pride and hungers. They speak of our relation with nature. They reflect our patterns of work and what we gain from that work. They show our relations with others, and what paths we take to self-respect, balance, and growth. They reflect our goals as a society. They tell how we build, live and love. They show whether we know ourselves as part of the great and all-encompassing drama and adventure of our universe, or if we see ourselves as a small and insignificant thing apart from it all. What they reflect back to us today is not inspiring.*

How we shape our surroundings demonstrates our values, and can be a tool for healing ourselves and our relations to others. In a sacred society our surroundings are a source of meaning, power and strength which we lack today. To make our surroundings better, our hearts need to be in a better place - which we are learning step by step. If our surroundings are better, they make us better. Strength leads to vitality, just as weakness leads to impotence.

Sacred places and sacred building are vital to a healthy society. We all (I hope) know of at least one place with such power that it should be held sacred. What sacred places boil down to is *honoring*. And

that is the key to a whole complex of social diseases!

Once we accept that some places should be held sacred, it is impossible to deny the sacredness of all places, all things, and all life. Affirming the sacredness of all our surroundings, we have to acknowledge that we inhabit a sacred world. As part of a sacred world, we are all to be held sacred also. And that calls forth a totally different way of relating and acting. If the person/place/world we love is not happy, we cannot be happy. We reject taking for greed rather than for need. We rediscover the multiple benefits of giving and sharing. Our ways of working, playing, celebrating, sharing, and shaping our surroundings all undergo fundamental change.<sup>5</sup> We find a new strength and vitality arising in all parts of our lives.

*Change ourselves, change our institutions and our impacts.*

*Create new dreams that embrace all of creation.*

*Honor everything.*

*Create gardens for our spirits.*

*Build in a sacred manner.*

*Transform tourism.*

*Create cities of passion.*

*Discover that the spirit of sustainability is the spirit of sacredness.*



## LIVING IN A SACRED WORLD

*The first step to both sound community and sound design is to reaffirm the sacredness of our world and establish that value as a touchstone of our society.<sup>6</sup>*

Life in a sacred society is difficult to comprehend, for we have few comparisons to the kind of support, strength, freedom, meaning, and confidence - and therefore health - that arise from being part of a community of respect. One dimension of it

can be seen in a Quaker or Japanese society, where consensus and shared decision-making, shared responsibility, and respect for others is still a central strength to society. Other dimensions can be seen in indigenous communities throughout the world which still maintain threads of ancient ties to land, spirit, and wholeness, and in the surroundings and patterns of life which were shaped by such traditions.

Be that aside, there is opportunity in every act of building to honor and show reverence, and building from a spiritual base brings often subtle but powerful changes in our ways of building. A window rather than a mirror over a bathroom sink greets us in the morning with a view into a garden rather than a look at our outsides in their worst condition. It stops the diminishment of self-esteem the mirror gives. It helps wean us from excessive attention to the surface qualities of things.

Think about our kitchens, with thousand dollar appliances and ten thousand dollar fake wood storage boxes nailed to the walls. Do they really honor or make better cooks or better meals?

*Our places need to convey a spirit of greatness in our hearts, of celebration of the universe we inhabit and of our connection with it. We need to create homes for our spirits as well as our bodies and activities. We need to express the special spirit of place and time in our surroundings - to celebrate the rain, the winter, the night, the heat - and find ways to live comfortably in harmony with them.*

Architecture is practiced today as a visual art, as the science of building, or as the servant of real estate development. This misses totally the heart of the matter. The power of architecture has always been in the realm of its meaning, and its ability to align and marshal the invisible inner forces of our spirits with the invisible forces of nature. Spirit and sacredness are the root of that power; and place, not space, its manifestation. These invisible forces of

nature have been the great formative forces of the 20th century, yet almost nowhere is their *power* embodied in the places we create today.

Sometimes we may stumble onto one of those rare places that bring us into powerful contact with the primal forces of our world - a remote farmhouse, a forgotten temple garden, a simple barn, or possibly a famous cathedral. They make our hearts overflow as much as does a grove of ancient redwoods or a mountaintop sunrise. We know then with certainty that our surroundings, and how we shape them, *can* powerfully move our hearts. They can give deep nourishment to our lives and provide us with concrete visions of what is needed and possible in all our actions. We can, without question, create places with a soul.<sup>7,8</sup>

*It is time to put heart back into our architecture.*



## CITIES OF PASSION

Cities, like buildings, have personalities and reflect their makers. Present efforts to improve the sustainability of our urban and cultural patterns have so far ignored the vital human component of all enduring patterns. Yet it is our dreams, our passions, our distinctive cultures and ways of life that give shape to our cities and give them the power to move our hearts and affect our lives.

Not unexpectedly, the cities that stand out in our minds are those that are tied to *passions* - our own or someone else's. A place we value is often one which has developed distinctive and unlikely character out of the quirks, enthusiasms, ardor or zeal, of some individual or group which shaped its nature and its destiny. A city can have the best conceivable design of green space, homes, neighborhoods, efficient transportation, and material and energy efficient

construction. That does not make it capable of moving our hearts.

*We need places we can love, and enjoy, and about which we can be fervent. We need to discover how to make the communities where we live able to raise our passions and move our hearts.*

Part of the specialness of places that touch our hearts is the Spirit of Place - those unique qualities of a place - its climate, geology, history and community of inhabitants that make it distinctively different from other places and which gives root to a unique personality and spirit in its inhabitants.

Most memorable and special to us is the unique and powerful expression of a culture which can arise from within those special conditions. Think of the "Paradise Gardens" of Isfahan in the desert, or the incredible water and temple systems of Angkor Wat harnessing river floods for a sustainable agriculture and tying it into the cosmology of their beliefs about the universe they inhabited.

Think of the powerful Itsukushima Shrine in Japan, whose crimson buildings float on their reflections in a tidal bay, as the festooned fishing boats assemble for their annual blessing. Consider the Winter Cities of Canada, which have grasped the power of imagery, meaning and emotion of winter living and transformed their communities into a wonderful celebration of winter with ice skating, winter festivals, skiing, snowmobiling and sled dog races.

Another important part of the power of great places, particularly urban ones, is the shape of a community livelihood which grew out of unique environmental, historical, cultural and technological conditions. Venice and Amsterdam both developed into centers of international ocean trade at a period when boats were the most effective way to move goods. Canal systems developed in both cities,

particularly as Venice was created from a series of marshy islands.

New England mill towns, in contrast, developed around the conversion of water into mechanical power to run manufacturing operations. In both cases, once other means developed to fuel the commercial passions which brought them into being, the dams, millponds, canals, mills and workshops have been discovered to have qualities of their own which can contribute to the specialness of life in that place. They have become a free gift of the past to the life of the community today!

The passions and driving force of individuals like Shah Jahan in India, Haussman in Paris, or L'Enfant in Washington DC have shaped the dominant nature of some wonderful cities. In others such as Rome, the refinements, transformations, and creative power of two thousand years have interacted to create their special magic.

In Nikko, Japan are located the funerary shrines of several of Japan's great shoguns or military rulers. The buildings themselves are intricately carved and gaudily lacquered, built through the "contributions" of tributary lords to the Shoguns. But what is most striking and memorable about a visit to the shrines is their setting. They are approached through long graveled avenues set between stone walls in a deep forest of great cryptomeria trees, which contribute great power to the setting and contrast to the buildings themselves. The trees 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".

And think of the enduring wonder which graces a village like Amien or Mt. St. Michael in France, where a quest for expression of the exultation of life and creation transformed an entire community into a magical manifestation of that power.

An all too infrequent passion is the pleasure of a community enjoying life and itself. Getting off a train one night in a crowded station in Sendai, Japan, I was suddenly surrounded with the sounds of laughter, singing, and merriment instead of the sounds of frantic travelers normal to such places. This was a city worth getting to know!

Some towns and villages in Spain and in South America have an evening tradition of the "passerada", where people gather in outdoor cafes and in the squares and enjoy the spectacle of the young and old eyeing each other, making overtures, beginning and renewing friendships. Paris has its sidewalk cafes. Italian and Greek neighborhoods are filled with a continual banter of give and take among their residents.

Many places which are powerful in our memories and emotions are the legacies of the wealthy and powerful, but some also arise from layer after layer of everyday acts of the everyday people living in a place. Amish villages and farm country show an indelible mark of their nurture of place, as do Swiss mountain villages where traditions of vibrant flower boxes in every window have evolved, giving a special spirit to even the simplest village.

Love of a place can evolve invisibly merely out of our act of *belonging* to it. When founding a new village, Southwest Indians would bury a rock during their ceremonies of founding. The rock would not necessarily be in the middle of the planned village, or a special rock, or prominently visible. It was importantly, however, a mark of relationship. It said, "In this place we will live. Our lives will be centered here, and we will see the universe and our surroundings from this point. Our lives here are a connection with this place." And out of that commitment arose a sense of connection with a meaningful, valued and loved place.

Similarly, the great cities of China have been built upon an image of the cosmos, the nation, nature, and our place within it which gives a unique and potent meaning to the lives of their inhabitants.

A couple of years ago I visited the Makah Indian Museum at Neah Bay in the extreme northwest corner of Washington's Olympic Peninsula. The museum contained wonderful objects made by the tribal ancestors in a village preserved by a mudslide for over a hundred years. Like most tribal lands, this was a poor one. The museum had restored a vital sense of their history, achievements, and self-esteem, as well as bringing in outside tourist dollars, and had seeded an empowering cycle of development. Most wonderful about the museum was the tone of a people proudly sharing the achievements of their families and ancestors in contrast to the academic and institutional feeling of most museums.

It was obvious that other tribes on the peninsula were jealous and envious of their neighbor's good fortune, and I started thinking how even a small village with few resources could empower itself. I thought about drumming, about singing, about dancing, storytelling, wood carving, boating, cooking, gardens, furniture making, or quilting. There are thousands of interests about which people become passionate.

Any community - large or small - can develop such a passion. It takes only a few people excited about something, then getting together to invite someone to teach a workshop, then developing their own skills, inviting other communities to festivals and competitions, and bringing together outstanding people with the same passion. Soon the community becomes known for that passion and it begins to shape their lives, their spirits, and the physical and emotional structure of their community. In the process it becomes something unique and wonderful for others to visit, share and experience.

Think of Spain and bullfights, Indianapolis and car racing, Paris and

sidewalk cafes, Milan and opera, Kyoto and Zen gardens. One small town on Vancouver Island in Canada, has become known as "The City of Totem Poles" from the efforts of a few people to preserve crumbling historical relics and breathe new life into a traditional skill.

That deep delving into an interest gives us a taste for things well and thoroughly done. It makes us aware of how much more we can achieve and what we gain personally from *everything* we do. It becomes a touchstone in our own experience by which we can weigh the depth of understanding and rightness in talk or action on any subject.

Anything deeply delved into develops wisdom, weirdness, and wonders. All are worth aspiring to.

It is clear, when we reflect upon it, how good it feels to be moved by the places where we live or visit. The power of those places evokes a similar will to self-esteem, to dreaming great dreams, and the will to achieve them. We can transform our communities into something which draws forth the love of residents and visitors alike - in the physical fabric of the city, in the celebrations it supports and nurtures, and the way of life it empowers.

A community which does not enjoy itself does not enjoy life. It has no great passions, and dreams only small dreams. Such a community has not learned the incredible drama of life of which we are part, and is not capable of creating sustaining bonds within itself, with its neighbors, and with the natural world in which it is embedded.

It is human passions and failings, dreams and difficulties, that dominate the spirit of place of cities and give them the power to arouse our feelings and our will to maintain, refine, and enrich them, and to ensure their life into the future.

*Make our communities places to love. That is the sustaining force of life. When we have communities we are passionate about, we will want them to endure and will assure the changes in infrastructure, land use, building practices and patterns of living essential to that survival.□*

## FOOTNOTES:

1. "Feng Shui: Energy and Place", *ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN PRIMER*, Tom Bender 1972, reprinted as "Feng-Shui: Earth Acupuncture", *EAST-WEST JOURNAL*, July 1973.
2. "Assessing the Significance of the Geo-Arts", Henry Dorst, *I.C.E.R. JOURNAL*, Fall-Winter 1992. International Centre for Earth Renewal, Vancouver BC.
3. "Time and Place", Tom Bender, *IN CONTEXT?*
4. "The Sacred Art of Building", Tom Bender, *IN CONTEXT*, Autumn 1986.
5. "Transforming Tourism", Tom Bender, *EARTH ETHICS*, Summer 1993.
6. "In Beauty We Walk", Tom Bender, 1992, unpublished.
7. "Making Sacred Places", Tom Bender, in *THE POWER OF PLACE*, James Swan, ed.
8. "Towards a Sacred Society", Tom Bender, *URBAN ECOLOGY*, Spring 1993