

# The Soul of Natural Building

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OUR deep and unconscious cultural values seem able to channel even our most “obvious” actions into results that are diametrically at odds with our original intentions. Twenty-five years after learning how to cut in half the energy and resource consumption in residential construction, we’re now building houses that are twice as large for a population that is twice as large, and in the process consuming twice the total energy and resources as before!

Alternatives to conventional wood residential construction, for example, only transfer our impacts onto other resources. Rather than giving enduring reduction in our ecological impacts, they are likely over time to leave us with twice the population and fewer resources—having already used up the opportunities to finance a transition to sustainability. The likelihood of major reduction in our material quality of life would then be far greater. We need to focus our primary attention on the *root* causes of resource impacts—our cultural *values* of greed and growth. Until we let loose of our insane belief that geometric expansion of our numbers and our appetites can continue in a finite world, *any* “eco-building” is only a Band-Aid. True “eco-building” involves *whether* and *how much* we build as well as *how*, and the *values* from which we work.

*Places with a soul.* It has been amazing to discover, over the last 25 years, that we *can* create places with souls, and to learn how to do so. We can now create places that move our hearts when we enter them, which give us peace and nurture, and which continue to unfold and enrich our lives the more we are part of them. When all the pieces are right, everyone who goes into one of these places breathes a sigh of relief. Their legs get rubbery and they want to sit down and just soak in the energy. Such places are filled with a powerful silence. They connect us to the rest of Creation. They nurture us with the breath of life. They are the soul of natural building and the goal to which it leads.

*Intention.* There are many attributes to places with soul. One of the most important is intention. All of our surroundings are like mirrors, reflecting back to us the intention that has gone into their making and use—the values of their makers. If made from greed, if made to deceive, they convey that. If they come from a meanness of soul or smallness of spirit, they surround us with that essence. If made with love, with generosity, with honoring of all life, they support and evoke the same intentions in our own lives. Clarity, strength, and rightness of intention also bring life force energy, or *chi*, into a place, with its ability to nurture our lives. The nature of our intention, whether in making or using a place, reflects that same energy back into our own lives, enhancing or weakening our own energy.

*Chi*, or life force energy, is another part of the soul of place that we are rediscovering today. Combined with intention, it forms the subtle energy template upon which our material world takes shape in its many wonderful variations. It is vital to supporting our physical as well as emotional and spiritual health. It is blocked by artificial building materials, intensive use of electromagnetic devices and cultural practices based on taking from others. We’re learning today that in addition to locating good natural power spots of *chi* to locate our buildings on, that the *chi* energy can be called in, enhanced and worked with by individual intention and group ritual, and forms the glue which keeps a community healthy. We’re discovering the connections with the spirit world in a *chi*-based world, and how places can be made specifically to work with individual and community *chi* and to act as access points to the spirit world.

*Diseases of the spirit.* The truly rampant diseases in our culture are not of the body, but of *the spirit*. They arise from lack of self-esteem and mutual respect, from failing to be of value to our community or to find meaning in our lives. They find expression in rape, substance abuse, addictions, violence, crime, obesity, isolation, depression and despair—things possible in any culture, overpowering in ours. They arise from the root violence in our deepest cultural values. Healing diseases of the spirit requires that we nurture, not neglect, the emotional and spiritual well-being of all. In our surroundings this requires the honoring of the materials, the elements and forces of nature, the rhythms and cycles of life, and limiting our wants so as not to prevent the fulfillment of other forms of life. These are all possibilities inherent in natural building materials, used with reverence.

*Giving.* In a culture like ours, rooted in taking from others and keeping things to ourselves, the act of *giving* is a powerfully transformative deed. Expressed in the use and alteration of our surroundings, it becomes the embodiment of the soul needed for sustainability as individuals and as a culture. Giving enriches places through what we discover we can give to other people or other life in the process of building. Giving shade or the scent and beauty of flowers to public areas, allowing pedestrian ways to cut through large projects, providing low walls that can be seating, or facilities that can be used by the community when not needed by the primary users—these are all gifts. So is building such that projects last beyond our lives and can become gifts to succeeding generations. Providing habitat for birds, spiders, bats and butterflies, restoring creeks and watersheds, providing wildlife migration routes, are all forms of giving, restraining our building to allow room for the rest of nature to live unthreatened.

*Right Duration.* Durability grants a generosity to the places we make that can be obtained in few other ways, and can immeasurably alter the per-generation cost of resources and work gone into creating our communities. A cathedral lasting 20 generations or a bridge lasting 20 centuries can give back far more than the effort put in its making, and lower the per-generation cost to less than the shabbiest constructions we make today. Durability's gifts need to be honored in our ways of building, and can underlie the gifts we leave to our children's children.

*The web of relationships.* It is important to follow far and deeply the web of significance of each of our choices. A comparison of an "engineered wood" approach to long-rotation forestry, for example, is surprisingly revealing. The long rotations ended up providing twice the timber per year (and better quality), *nine times* the net economic yield from the timber production, and a total of 30 to 40 times the overall economic value of the forests once impacts on fisheries, other forest products, and recreation were factored in. It also resulted in mature forests and old-growth trees. Total banning of use of wood also has a deeper ill. Excluding it from our lives amounts to *shunning*—the harshest punishment conceivable in some cultures.

When a person is shunned, others totally ignore their existence and act as if they are not present. It is a true exclusion from community, and a deep punishment indeed. To ignore wood in this way, to shun it, to exclude it from our lives is to ensure its death, not the restoration of its health and abundance. To ensure its well-being, we need to do the opposite—not use it more, but use it with *honor*, use it in ways that reveal its wonder, use it in ways that our hearts are moved by its wonderful nature, use it in ways that we love it so much that we demand and ensure the survival and health of our forests.

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