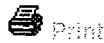




A LIVING LIBRARY A GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL NETWORK OF DIVERSITY AND COMMONALITY

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Article

"I believe that, in the long run, diversity is preferable to efficiency and convenience, even preferable to the serenity of absolute peace. Without diversity, freedom is but an empty word; persons and societies cannot continue to evolve. Human beings are not really free and cannot be fully creative if they do not have many options from which to choose."
-- **Rene Dubos**

Is there a link between ecological and sustainable development, open public spaces, education and local and global peace? Can we interconnect these seemingly disparate arenas and discover solutions to solve serious problems? **A Living Library** believes it is very possible and also a functional necessity to do so.

A synergistic approach that combats fragmentation is essential--one that is interdisciplinary and community-oriented and involves all human, ecological, economic, historic, technological and aesthetic resources. A way to do this is to create intellectually and visually exciting interactive learning environments, which are integrated with programmes and curricula that stimulate and support creativity and choice, and that motivate students and all sectors of the community to participate and learn and grow together. It also transforms the physical environment in relevant ecological ways. Most people have either little comprehension or awareness of the connections between different life systems or the sensitivity to notice that culture is indeed a part of nature. Who we are as a species, and what we do on the planet and in space, is part of a larger whole--everything is interconnected.

There are ways to transform grave problems within our environments, educational systems and society at large, and to develop a healthy future where integrated systems and diversity are embraced. Learning, creating and maintaining the environment are also celebrated. But we must think holistically and integrate our resources ecologically and artfully. Just as we must understand our planet to be an ecological system, we must also understand planning, designing, learning and other aspects of living--the many processes and results--as an integrated whole, an ecological system of interrelated parts. Otherwise, we will continue to suffer from disjointed, ineffectual and dysfunctional fragments. It is therefore a functional necessity that we develop public places, educational environments and cultural connections with synergy as the goal and process.

Most people agree that schools are failing for a vast number of students--many of them are not learning and are bored or hostile towards the experience. Some see school and learning as irrelevant to their lives or as an institution in which they can not succeed. As a result, for example in the United States, the dropout rate is alarmingly high and on the rise. Not only are these young people missing out today, but their future will be seriously impaired. The quality of a nation's cultural richness and diversity

will also be weakened, and the economy will suffer due to an uninspired and unskilled workforce. But the irony here is that learning, studying and research can be enjoyable, empowering and interesting. When totally involved and supported, students experience self-esteem, a sense of fulfillment, excitement and wonder. Many believe that ideally, learning is a lifelong process and not just limited to a school room or a few short years.

But *perhaps*, even more importantly, our flawed educational systems raise another question. Are deeply-rooted educational problems the symptoms of larger societal issues on a global scale--a result of pervasive fragmented thinking and behaviour in much of our scholastic lives and beyond? If so, is it even possible to transform lives, society and learning experiences, as well as attitudes and practices toward them? This certainly raises a series of bigger interrelated problems and questions. Is it possible for us to reinvent our schools and provide learning experiences that will enable all students to be motivated and have positive experiences while raising their learning curve and preparing them for today's global world of information and communication? And is it possible to create integrated, real-world learning opportunities for the benefit of the community at large as well?

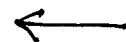
In conventional architecture and landscape architecture, the public environment is usually created with little or no attention given to the programme or events that will occur in that space. The processes of research, planning, design, implementation, use, maintenance, management and communications of the space, once built, usually exclude the public. Yet, it is from these rich processes that significant solutions can be found, which will help to heal misunderstandings and prejudices among people, flawed educational systems, as well as solve serious problems of misuse, neglect and abuse of the environment.

Achieving this potential of an integrated, interactive landscape and social architecture will help transform our cultural attitudes and non-ecological, underused or vandalized public places into exciting, vibrant, aesthetic learning laboratories in which many sectors of the community celebrate together. When we use nature as a model, we can see that all diverse life elements--animal, vegetable, mineral/biological, cultural, technological--are related and interconnected, albeit to varying degrees. This basic awareness creates a conceptual/emotional/spiritual climate for ecological and egalitarian thinking, feeling and being, and also leads toward developing processes and structures for environmental justice and ecological transformation in our communities.

Using this approach, we can easily design relevant environmental and social structures that accommodate and include difference, contrast and diversity. Each place and situation is unique, yet when seen and experienced together, the interrelationships and analogies are fascinating, helping us to see our commonalities and appreciate our diversity. This becomes a wonderful source of information, as well as the basic form for a new aesthetic. When conceptual, environmental and social are vitally linked, we have the makings for an exciting, relevant and functional art form called "Func shui onal Art", so named and practiced by this author.

Life Frames, Inc., a non-profit sponsor of A Living Library, in conjunction with the World Council of Peoples for the United Nations, a non-governmental organization (NGO) with a focus on sustainable development and environmental issues, in association with the United Nations Department of Public Information, offers **A Living Library & Think Park**: a synergistic vision and opportunity to create culturally sensitive, ecological and sustainable community learning environments for all ages in diverse places in the world.

A Living Library (ALL) is a metaphor: Everyone and everything on earth and in space is part of "a living library", including all the things we create, such as parks, gardens, schools, curricula, artworks, networks, communities, celebrations. ALL provides a powerful framework for understanding that culture and technology are part of nature. A Life Frame provides a way to frame life so we can see and experience it more profoundly. A Think Park helps us to think, feel and be more empathetic to each other and all species.



Each unique **Branch Living Library & Think Park** interconnects and incorporates local resources--seen through the lens of time--which are researched, planned, designed and implemented into content-rich, sustainable and transformed landscapes by all sectors of the community, including children, adults and the disabled. As a systemic framework and vehicle for making relevant changes in communities in the developed and developing worlds, ALL provides a practical planning tool and series of outcomes to transform diverse places. It also provides a holistic vision, showing creative ways to develop meaningful healing, ecological, sustainable, environmental and educational transformation in communities.

ALL as a global network of diversity and commonality

When linked together around the world with live interactive broadcast, each branch of ALL will showcase and celebrate the local place and its resources, viewed through green-powered digital gateways. When seen in counterpoint, the diversities and similarities between cultures and ecologies will become more obvious. This will provide economic and community development for each locale, while creating profound opportunities to appreciate and understand distant places. When we learn all that we can about our local place, we can then extrapolate and learn about the world.

ALL transforms sunken meadows and brown fields, urban sprawl and desolation, public parks and plazas, concrete and asphalt schoolyards, civic centres, undeveloped communities or wastelands into vibrant community learning environments and highly visible public magnets, offering innovative and practical community and economic development.

ALL develops themed, content-rich landscapes with integrated community programmes, multidisciplinary project-based learning and state-of-the-art communications technologies. Created by all sectors, it cultivates the "human garden", by its emphasis on diversity, commonalities, participation and inclusivity from the peoples of the world. ALL provides a practical and enchanting way to bring us together and celebrate life. By creating parks, gardens and other places in our communities in need of transformation, as **A Living Library**, they become powerful engines to support local education and development, while leading us toward deeper global understanding, sharing and interconnecting. And by discovering and celebrating our diversity and commonalities locally, and linking through a global network of **Branch Living Libraries**, we will be closer to creating and sustaining world peace and prosperity for all species on Earth.

When we think of parks today, we often think of them as passive green spaces, tranquil oases for leisurely reflection, recreation and communion with "nature". This is the legacy left to us by Frederick Law Olmsted and others of the nineteenth century English picturesque landscape tradition--Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City are notable examples of Olmsted's work, but they represent just one kind. If we examine parks and gardens from an international and historic perspective, we find many other traditions that join the aesthetic with the symbolic, historic, ecological, social and educational resources of an environment and culture. For example, in China and Japan, the ancient parks and gardens were created for meditation and contemplation, and were symbolically laid out with precise meaning given to each rock, plant and animal. Especially in China, all elements were aligned ecologically according to feng shui principles based on natural systems--the park there today is a place where students learn about science. The ancient enclosed gardens of Persia (named *pardes* and later called *paradeisos* by the Greeks, from whence comes the term *paradise*) were arranged in squares separated by the four "rivers of life" and planted with symbolic plants and patterns. The Medieval Garden in the West was also enclosed and often a place of learning. In fact, the modern sciences of botany and medicine come from the observation and careful tending by the monks of the many herbs and vegetables in the garden knot beds. The Botanical Garden was also laid out in squares, but each section represented a different portion of the known world with its corresponding plants. It was originally meant to represent the Biblical Garden of Eden, where all manner of delight and fertility coexisted peacefully. In the Renaissance, the garden became even

more geometric and architectural with great artworks, fountains, topiary and elaborately patterned beds. The seventeenth-century French Formal Garden displayed geometry in the extremes, with great avenues laid out so that the ruler could look in any direction and see his great wealth. It even had more elaborately embroidered patterns, called *parterres*, and was a place for social interaction and cultural creation, with poetry, music and dance often being composed for special events. Versailles provides an excellent example.

The English reacted very strongly against all of this rigid geometry. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they explored a more romantic naturalistic environment. These gardens were narrative, representative landscapes with elements from antiquity, like fake ruins from mythological places. This picturesque tradition led to the development of park and garden in the nineteenth century that are primarily known today in western cultures as the tranquil green oasis.

As we can see, there is a great deal of landscape diversity that has existed. We can draw on elements from the past and invent new ones for the future, so that our public environments will become ecologically and socially sound, as well as visually unique, incorporating precedents from history.

In so doing, we will counteract many of the typical problems found in public open spaces, particularly in urban areas--the seedy, under-cared, vandalized places, where drug dealing is usually rampant and most people feel unsafe. At the beginning of this century, it is possible to transform derelict places into vibrant, healthy public spaces, if we combine aesthetic, ecological, educational, social, and symbolic resources in our communities. As the eminent observer of cities, Jane Jacobs wrote in the early sixties: "Only a genuine content of economic and social diversity ... has meaning to the park and the power to confer the boon of life upon it."

A Living Library points the way to a healthy, creative and interesting development, in which many sectors of a community participate in the creation, use, maintenance, management and communications of the landscape, where schools, parks and other resources are linked together. The open space becomes the site and the content for celebration, discovery, meditation, education, communication and creation. The available technological resources are also incorporated, allowing us to communicate interactively, locally and globally. Thus, the park, garden or other public spaces become the vital heart of a healthy community, and the people and plants are nourished.

Life Frames, Inc. currently has several **Branch Living Library & Think Park** transformations underway in California and New York. If you or your community would like to become part of this network, please contact <http://www.alivinglibrary.org>

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