Chapter 8
Urban ecology:
Art & the cultivation of ecological mindsets

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In disciplines as diverse as art, urban planning, physics and farming, just to name a few, it is fast becoming understood that the root of our current ecological crises – and indeed many of our social ones – lies in the wholesale separation of our society from the ecological reality of life on this planet (Roszak 1992; Elgin 2009). This separation manifests itself in every corner of our lives, and has resulted in a nearly complete failure of contemporary human culture to find ways of existing cooperatively as living beings within the larger living system we call Earth (Fukuoka 1978).

Yet as dire as this predicament may seem, solutions to it abound. This chapter will focus on the underlying cultural mindsets that inform these solutions. Specifically, it will explore the theory and practice of re-connecting our ways of living and being with the rest of nature, and the possibilities of using *art* as an inherently ecologically-integrated way of thinking and acting.

Although we will look at this issue from an *artist* mindset, it is important to note that *all* of us have this capability. As such, the entirety of this chapter may be applied to any discipline you may think of, from urban planning to systems engineering. Why exactly this re-connection with nature needs to take place, and how you can use the artist mindset to initiate ecological actions will hopefully become more clear in the following few pages.

Cultivating Ecological Mindsets

I sit here, writing within the grounds of a 1,800-year-old Shinto shrine on the outskirts of Osaka, Japan. The traditional cultural belief of the Japanese people, Shinto is based essentially in knowing our connection with nature, and expressing gratitude and reverence for the sacredness of everything within this nature, from rivers and stones, to animals and

mountains (Yamakage 2006). There is no doctrine to guide this reverence, and yet within the tradition, there remains even today, an understanding that the way human beings *should* live is "the way of nature." It's worth noting that for some centuries, this cultural mindset was at the foundations of what might be the only example of a sustainable advanced society in human history (Brown 2012).

I give the brief example of Shinto not to put a halo around the Japanese way of thinking, but rather to highlight just one of the many possibilities extant in this world, to cultivate our relationships with nature. In the Western world, the academic fields of ecopsychology, deep ecology, traditional ecological knowledge, and some branches of physics, are also striking similar chords both in their philosophy and in clinical, or real world, practice (Roszak 1995). Globally, our arts, humanities, sciences, world religions, and wisdom traditions are uniting under the realization that to act sustainably, is to act in partnership with nature, rather than as lords and owners of nature (Anderson 2013, Elgin 2009).

Where do we find opportunities to cultivate nature-connected mindsets? Certainly, a centuries-old nature shrine is not the only worthy place to seek such a connection. After all, shrines themselves are only anthropocentric odes; human structures built to help us realize the value of what are essentially much, much older and wiser elements of nature around us.

The grounds of Sumiyoshi Taisha, a Shinto shrine founded in 211 CE in what is now Osaka, Japan. Photo, P.M. Lydon

In the most basic sense, the answer of where to search for opportunities to re-build our fundamental relationships with nature, is to put ourselves in nature, to go to nature itself (Kawaguchi 2015).

If one were in Edinburgh, they might find similar peace sitting in one of Patrick Geddes' minuscule Pocket Parks; in Seoul, a walk into the urban Bukhansan National Park is highly favored by locals; or in Silicon Valley, with parks as sparse and uninspiring as they are, we might find company in the small yet magnificently appointed Los Gatos Creek. Even in the midst of the most dense and seemingly 'un-natural' exhibition of edificial worship, scruffy and resolute weeds are bound to sprout up somewhere.

Irrespective of our infrastructure, nature truly abounds everywhere, if we look hard enough.

Located partly within Seoul city limits and easily accessible from the city on foot, Bukhansan is the most highly visited national park in the world per square km. Photo, P.M. Lydon

Although some settings may be more conducive than others, every human being has the ability to seek out a deeply interconnected relationship with the nature we live in, no matter who, or where, we are (Conn 1995). Ultimately the foundation for this relationship is not to be found in a place, in a practice, in a doctrine, or in a book – although these may help point us in the right direction – but rather, in each individual's own intentions and actions.

A Wider, Nature-Connected View

Though we may well realize the need to be more 'connected to nature' or to 'follow nature,' it is often difficult to move in this direction, especially when operating within an urban culture that seems, at every corner, to go full throttle against nature.

How can one handle this? Firstly, we should remember that society itself – the people and organizations and structures around us – regardless of their lack of connection to or affinity for the environment, are nature, too.

Nature is not only a tree in the forest untouched by humanity – if even that did exist – nor is it only to be found at a shrine dedicated to a mountain. Likewise, asking humans to re-connect to nature means more than idolizing some view of 'pristine' nature. It means something far more broad. It means fully realizing and accepting ourselves as an interconnected part of the wider ecosystem that we live in, and acting in light of that realization.

Japanese natural farmer Kawaguchi Yoshikazu puts it by reminding us that even if we live in a high-rise apartment in the middle of an urban area devoid of parks or trees, we do not truly live in a city, we live in a universe (Kawaguchi 2015). With this dramatically wider frame of

reference, we can begin to imagine the reality of what it means to live in a city in a broad sense, rather than an isolated sense.

Cultivating and applying such an understanding to our work and life is an incredibly freeing act. In appreciating the wider view of ourselves within nature, we can begin to see principals of nature arising within ourselves, allowing us to act *with nature* instead of against it (Naess 2010).

Equality and Diversity

Unfortunately for this chapter, the concept of *following nature* is something which is incapable of being adequately conveyed by words. As sage and scientist have both professed over the ages, such wisom must come from an individual's interaction and relationship with the Earth, and their coming to know their unique role and voice as an integral part of that Earth.

When we do cultivate such a relationship, our actions will begin to mirror and/or reinforce many aspects of nature itself. These aspects are things that we *can* identify, and they take form in characteristics like **equality**, or the understanding that no part of nature – humans included – is more or less important than any other part. As well, the characteristic of **diversity**, which informs us that every part of nature has its own unique and inherently valuable role to play within the whole, even if we human beings cannot fully see or understand what that role is.

Diversity and equality are intertwined in that all the *diverse elements* within any ecosystem should be *equally allowed* to perform their roles without the constant threat of

anthropocentric discrimination as to whether or not they are valuable or useful for human beings.

Applied explicitly to human culture, *diversity* and *equality* in this sense could mean realizing that every human being has their unique voice and creative role in society, and subsequently that we must work to nourish – or at least accept – the development of each of these unique individual voices and roles.

Equality and diversity also means letting garden bugs play their roles, even if it ends with holes in your radish leaves! Photo, P.M. Lydon

Within this is an implicit trust, that if equality and diversity are nourished in all senses, our roles as individual human beings will naturally grow to fulfill society's needs in ecologically sound ways.

It is useful to imagine how these concepts might take form in cities as well. What do diversity and equality mean in an urban context? If we were to view the city as an

interconnected part of the ecosystem, how might our built environment itself also grow into an expression of social and ecological equality and diversity?

To achieve this, means coming to know the role of yourself and your city in light of these social and ecological connections, and creatively imagining ways to live equitably within the diverse nature that you inhabit, together.

This task generally asks for an open-minded awareness, and curiosity of our environments; throughout human history, such task has often fallen to a single subset of individuals within society: the artists. We know these artists variously as painters, sculptors, poets, musicians, but also more widely as philosophers, scientists, and architects, among others. It is to this category of thinkers and 'creators' that we owe the bulk of our inventions and our progress. However, one of the greatest secrets humankind has ever hidden from itself, is that each one of us, in our own unique way, harbors these very creative abilities too. Yet even if our society has mostly given up our ability to connect with nature and subsequently, our ability to imagine, the deceivingly simple antidote is for us just to *practice imagining* once again (Sewall 2005).

It is one of the roles of the artist to help us in this practice, to poke holes in the walls which hide our creative nature from us, and to allow the urban dweller to catch glimpses of the possibilities in their own bond with this nature, a nature in which we dwell, but so often are not allowed to see or fully take part in.

It is in light of this that we will consider the remainder of this chapter.

Art and Ecological Connectedness

Within the larger urban ecology movement, trained artists are often called on to help facilitate creative actions, and often, to elicit foundational changes to the ways we think and operate as a society. As we will explore, the role of the *artist* is far broader than this, and in turn includes much more than producing a work of contemporary or traditional art to hang in a museum, or to be placed in a public plaza.

Art is a mindset, a process, and a way of thinking and working available to everyone, in every discipline.

In the simplest of senses, *art* is the process of giving form to a human being's relationship with nature; inasmuch, it is a true expression of each one's individual unique worldview (Tarkovsky 1986).

From this viewpoint, the central value of art to the urban ecology movement is that *art itself* is fundamentally rooted in ecological connectedness. Though art does not always manifest itself in directly ecological messages, it nonetheless represents the opportunity extant in every moment, to realize collaboration between human beings and the nature to which we are inextricably tied. By taking part in the *making* or even *experiencing* of art, human beings are literally creating opportunity for an active partnership with nature, and in this partnership we are offered ways to express, feel, and interrogate the truths of our relationship with nature at some of the deepest and most profound levels (Bouyer and Lydon 2017).

Everyone is an Artist

How difficult is it to impart this nature-connected, artist mindset to others?

Considering that human beings have been undertaking creative activities in collaboration with nature since our very beginning, and further, that our capacity for creativity is at the root of what defines us as a species (Fuentes 2017), it is likely easier than we think.

Art is inherent in you, in me, and in all human beings. Indeed, one of the most well-known creative minds of the past century, Joseph Beuys often remarked that everyone has creative potential, and fundamentally, every human being is an artist (Rose 1993).

If all art is ecological, then what is eco-art?

Ecological art (eco-art) is a genre of the arts that not only works with environmental materials and themes – as environmental art does – but in which the fundamental foundations of the work in concept and execution, directly aim to address ecological issues (Bower 2010). Eco-art is not limited to a particular medium, and is inherently based on working together (Fremantle 2015) both with other human beings and in collaboration with the nature in which the project takes place.

Think about commonly used terms like “the art of cooking” or “the art of city building.” When we call something *art* in this way, we are essentially recognizing an act done with truth, with beauty, with a seeming effortlessness, as if the person doing it is somehow integrated with nature (Haley 2011). Indeed, we also often call the person who does their job in such a way a *natural,* which again, is simply an acknowledgment that they are acting in accordance with nature.

Whether designer, architect, urban planner, clerk, office assistant, or janitor, the role of the *artist* as discussed here is open and available to anyone, anywhere, to use regardless of your background, job, or social position.

Should you wish to engage the artist mindset in your own work, it is useful to remind yourself that:

1. You are inherently an artist.

2. You hold within you, the ability for a nature-connected, creative way of thinking and being.

3. These first two points are one in the same.

Ecologically connected in spirit, and manifest in our actions, the artist mindset opens the potential to bring us into more 'natural' ways of doing all that we do.

A Few Case Studies

The following studies are not cases to hoist up on a pedestal. Such an act would be a disservice to everything this chapter is about. Instead, take these simply as a few wee specks in a constellation of millions of equally-important actions happening around the world. The focus here are the small, the local, the diverse, and easily accessible actions which are taking place in cities around the world. They are the kinds of creative actions which in spirit – if not in exact form – could take place in literally any city.

Osaka, Japan – Art and Compassion in a Garden

In a small empty lot in a low-income neighborhood of Osaka, tucked between century-old homes, warehouses, and small factories is the pint-sized *Branch Pocket Farm*. Inspired by the *Pocket Parks* of Patrick Geddes and initiated by two eco artists – myself and partner Suhee Kang – the garden exists to help visitors cultivate relationships between themselves and the plants and living things in the soil. It is managed in the spirit of Japan's natural farming movement, where every activity in the garden is carried out in attempt to foster respect for all living beings.

C*onnection* and *compassion* are key words in the garden. During loosely structured, largely unguided eco-art workshops, we offer basic scientific knowledge to visitors about the millions of living things in each square inch of soil. Standing in the garden, participants undertake a short ceremony, where we ask the plants and soil to work in partnership with us, and to lend us their color and texture so that we might express and share elements of truth and beauty through our artwork.

Participants are allowed to come into their own relationships with the nature around them, and some meaningful discoveries emerge. One participant from Tokyo remarked that she always had a fondness for flowers, but that she had never before noticed how beautiful the soil could be. A student from Thailand noticed how the colors that flowers produce on his paper change radically based on how they are treated; soft rubbing of one particular flower produces a gentle ocean blue hue, with vigorous rubbing the blue quickly turns into a drab brown; he favored the former treatment of the flower. These are small breakthroughs. They can be multiplied anywhere.

Workshop participants of multiple backgrounds and ages display their nature artworks, made only with soil and plants. Photo, P.M. Lydon

In Practice – The guiding principles are simple 1) work slowly, cultivating respect for all living things, 2) be conscious not to judge yourself, others, or nature as 'good' or 'bad,' but instead to cultivate non-judgmental awareness, and 3) encourage participants to engage in meaningful relationships with the natural materials as they work, allowing them to explore their own methods and inventions rather than a set of prescribed techniques. This is a process of nurturing seeds that already exist inside of people, and of helping them to grow into an ecological mindset. It is not a process that begins and ends with a single workshop (Lydon 2015).

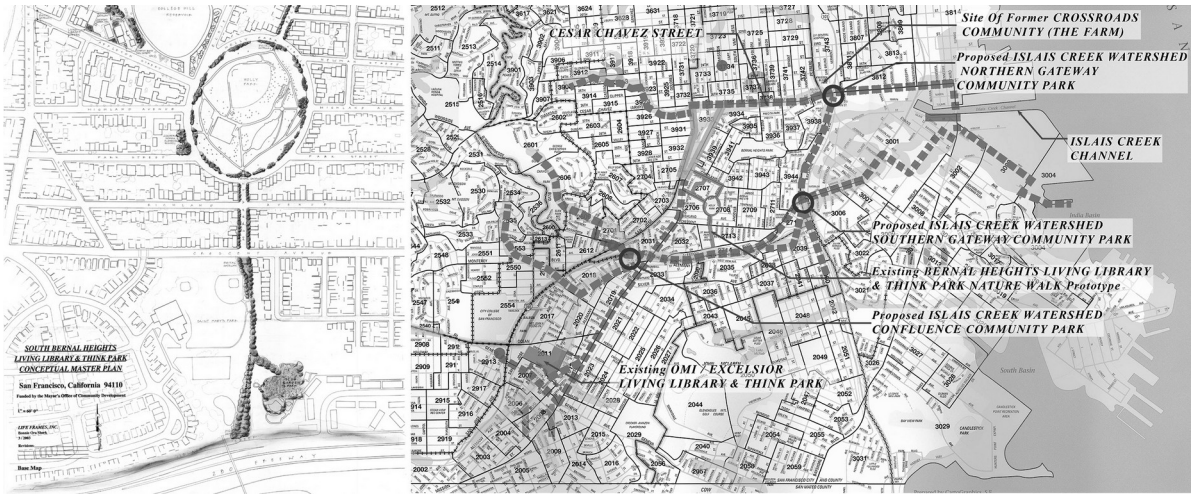
San Francisco, USA – Relationships with a Lost Watershed

A group of schoolchildren stand on top of the Islais Creek Watershed, an 8 mi^2 (20 km^2) watershed, and the largest in San Francisco, California. However, there is no visible water,

no river bed, no reeds, no fish or tadpoles. Only cars. They are standing on pavement, underneath which formerly flowed the Islais Creek.

An effort to restore the creek here, as in many urbanized areas, would be a logistical, political, and economic monster the likes of which we rarely see – save for such examples as Seoul's Cheonggyecheon Stream. Here in San Francisco however, not only parking lots or streets, but also homes, schools, and businesses have been built over the former creek..

Instead of proposing a project that would be nearly impossible to realize, artist Bonnie Ora Sherk used her diverse background in landscape architecture, ecology, and education to realize what she calls *A Living Library & Think Park*. The project manifests in a necklace of spaces along the watershed area, offering hands-on, community engaged spaces. Acres of socially and ecologically disconnected land have been turned into ecologically functional 'learning zones' filled with native plants, flowers, vegetables, organic fruit trees, and perhaps most importantly, with local schoolchildren, parents, and political officials.



The artist's master plans for A Living Library Nature Walk (left) and Islais Creek Watershed (right).
Images copyright 2005 Bonnie Ora Sherk, A Living Library & Life Frames, Inc.

Though the project is already substantial in size – it has expanded to other neighborhoods within San Francisco, as well as to New York City's Roosevelt Island – Sherk considers all of it a 'prototype' for a much broader, international network of digitally connected parks throughout our urban habitats (2018).

In Practice – Sherk's parks rely on social practice and subsequently, serve an important social purpose, in revealing, reconnecting, and celebrating the environmental and cultural histories of neighborhoods. However, they go beyond this, offering flood mitigation, resilient, drought-resistant landscapes, and safe, accessible areas where wildlife and people can co-mingle. In order to achieve these results, Sherk had to dedicate herself to engaging in a long-term mission to build relationships and trust between community members, elected officials, herself, and the rest of this nature.

Bonn, Germany – The Moving of Meadows

In 1994, a 400 year-old meadow was about to be replaced by a large scale urban development. In a move led by *The Harrison Studio* – and involving scientists, designers, biologists, and the general public – the two artists proposed an exhibition called *Endangered Meadows of Europe*, whereby sections from four distinct endangered meadows would be 'rolled up,' transported, and installed on the roof of the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik, a large museum in Bonn. To the surprise of many, the meadows thrived. Tucked into a 0.8 hectare rooftop, the four meadows together supported more than 140 species of wild plants, and represented what was believed to be the most complex biotope in all of Europe (Harrison 2016). The meadows remained for two years, after which they were moved near the Rhine River, with further seeding to help propagate the meadow further into the wider park system in Bonn.

Rather than making a simple statement about the importance of an endangered meadow, or a polarizing work about the ills of urban development, the artists instead chose to connect us to something more fundamentally positive and constructive. They used the exhibition as a functional centerpiece for conversations about how meadows historically co-evolved through human environmental influence, about the importance of ecological services and biodiversity within those co-evolving meadows, and about how human beings might build future urban spaces in light of such human-nature collaborations.

In Practice – While this was a large-scale project, involving costs and infrastructure outside the scope of most individuals, it is included here firstly because it signals a much-needed positive, curious, constructive response to what would otherwise be an overwhelmingly negative issue. Secondly, the process of propagating a meadow does not necessarily need to be complex or costly. Indeed, if given a little help, many natural environments are quite capable to do much of the work on their own. Creative groups of individuals in cities around the world consistently engage in similar acts. They use names like seed bombing (see Fukuoka), guerrilla gardening, community allotments, community supported agriculture, and ecological restoration.

Wherever it is understood that these opportunities flourish when we meet nature as a collective of inherently creative minds, such tactics and outcomes will become all the more common, and more successful.

The Power of ‘Place’ and ‘Permission’

As many examples as we might offer, it will still be the case that human beings will derive great strain and pain from the act of figuring out how to impart such an impossibly

idealistic-sounding mindset to a society of technology-obsessed, nature-deprived, consumerist, urban dwellers.

How can we possibly facilitate the process of ‘re-connecting’ human beings with nature, when we have forgotten our very ability to cultivate such a relationship?

For such a deep and complex issue, we might think that an equally deep and complex educational framework would have to be implemented across the broad and diverse demographic range found in our cities. Fortunately, this is not so.

The reality is that we have one fundamental social and ecological issue: we have individually lost our sense of relationship with the Earth. As a result, there is only one fundamental solution: re-cultivating this relationship.

A nature art workshop participant in Osaka, Japan uses soil and flowers to make color.
Photo, P.M. Lydon

Such a solution cannot be standardized; it can only ever be led by the experience of each person's interactions with the Earth and nature itself, and further, it must be conducted in a social environment that is supportive and open for this to take place, rather than restrictive and dictatorial.

In the scope of urban eco-fixes, though this is a long-term project, it is actually one of the more simple and effective targets to help a transformation toward environmental sanity to occur. Programs and processes can also help, but anything we implement must again, ultimately, allow for individuals to find answers for themselves.

In this pursuit there are two simple goals – one physical, one social – that are helpful to keep with us in any project we might carry out: :

Places to connect with nature – Set aside space for nature. Space is opportunity for regeneration. It is opportunity for connection. These spaces need not be big, costly, or difficult to maintain, and can often be partially managed by communities themselves. They should however, be numerous and diverse in biological makeup and use, allowing for use variously by humans and other wildlife as appropriate. If we want to talk about sustainability, we must accept this as a realistic need in our cities.

Permission to connect with nature – This is a social element. It requires a cultural shift. People must fundamentally feel that it is socially *okay* to participate in relationship-building with nature. Achieving this requires a soft hand, permission to allow people to use their own capacity for connection and creativity, as well to let them know that yes, it's okay to visit your favorite tree for a cup of tea, it's okay to say thank you to the soil, it's okay to take a *nature break* instead of a *smoke break*.

Even absent *places* to connect with nature, art still performs particularly well the job of cultivating *permission*, breaking the barrier of social acceptance, and allowing the general public to rekindle this relationship between ourselves and our environments. However, many other forms of creative work within nature can begin to facilitate this as well (though most of them will require *place*): growing food in the city through natural farming, permaculture, regenerative organic, and agroecology, as well, hosting nature-connected community events, urban nature walks, outdoor movie nights, local events and community picnics celebrating locally-grown and produced food and drink, seasonally-themed festivals, outdoor meditation, yoga, *tai chi*, sensing exercises, re-connecting with local traditional knowledge, and really most anything you could think of so long as it is related to knowing and celebrating the characteristics of our local environments in a deeper way.

What so many eco artists have found in practice, is that the process of collectively rekindling our lost relationship with the natural environment – and of seeing the Earth, plants, animals, and even the seemingly inanimate, as our kin – has little to do with intellectually understanding a theoretical framework. Quite plainly, it is about the simple act of putting ourselves in nature every day, and of giving ourselves and those around us the *place* and *permission* to discover this relationship – and ensuing compassion or biophilia – for themselves, in their own way (Kawaguchi 2015).

The Public as Artists and Curators

If creativity itself is not explicitly the province of the person we ordinarily call an artist, but the province of all human beings, of the architect, the developer, the economist, the farmer, and the programmer, then our view of what is possible within our neighborhoods and cities suddenly expands exponentially. Gradually, citizens are realizing their ability to create

artwork as a fluid part of the public realm, rather than working through a bureaucratic process to ‘place’ a piece of art in a public space (Goldstein 2005).

The difference is one of changing our view from seeing art as an *object within a city*, to seeing it as a *collaborative process* between people, nature, and urban structures. With this mindset, we cease seeing sculptures *in* the city, and begin instead, to see *the city itself as art*, an art in which we can all take part as artist and curator.

In Closing

If we are to build cities of social and ecological wellness, we must put the cultivation of our relationship with this Earth at the foundation of what we do. We must embrace the fact that in this relationship lies our opportunity to fulfill our individual roles as fundamentally creative beings within this nature, in all that we do. Done alone, this will bring positive results. Done collaboratively with our neighbors, friends, and co-workers, it will only multiply in effectiveness, resilience, and diversity.

Whether through the arts or any other pursuit, once we come into a proper relationship with this Earth, we will intuitively know how to make a living (Korn 2014), and we will come to know our ‘essential role’ in the restoration of the natural world (Aizenstat 1995).

The kind of cultural identity shift we need to facilitate will come primarily from our very neighborhoods. It will come from the small expressions of creativity and partnership with nature played out in urban alleys, in creeks, rivers, and hillsides; it will come from the tiny natural parks cared for cooperatively by neighbors, just as well as the nature graffiti scrawled on old brick walls; it will come from the private living rooms opened up as galleries and salons for public discourse about art, nature, science, craft beer, gumbo, and

good urbanism; it will come from the pubs, the cafes, garages, and warehouses where groups of concerned citizens get together to imagine, and build, their future together.

Carrying out our work in the urban sphere with an *artist mindset* means making our work on this Earth a meaningful expression of truth, beauty, and of our relationship with nature; it is a mindset which brings with it, endless possibilities for cultivating ecological connectedness and wellbeing in what we do. Regardless of the scale and substance, each act done with this mindset plants a seed of possibility, not only for our generation, but for all future generations, to grow urban spaces that are not only more ecologically sustainable, but that are quite simply healthier, more equitable places for all beings to live.

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