

Interview with Timothy Beatley

Christa Wagner

On February 19, 2009, the UNC-Chapel Hill Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP) sponsored a lecture by Timothy Beatley, Teresa Heinz Professor of Sustainable Communities in the Department of Urban and Environmental Planning at the University of Virginia. A DCRP graduate himself (MA '84, Ph.D. '86), Beatley has co-authored books with Prof. David Godschalk and Prof. David Brower on hazard mitigation and coastal zone management, although he is best known for his work on the theory and practice of sustainable communities (see a review of his latest book on page 65). During his visit to Chapel Hill, Christa Wagner spoke with Beatley about new (and old) meanings of sustainability, roles for planners in reimagining cities, and going "glocal."

You are a member of the planning department faculty at the University of Virginia, where you have taught for more than twenty years. Have any of the "take home" lessons about the field changed for your students over your tenure?

Obviously in some ways—in many ways—the conditions of the world have changed and the problems we're facing, the magnitude of the problems, is that much greater. The need to move forward with solutions is more pressing than it might have been twenty years ago. But on the other hand, the solutions are not all that different and the message is not all that different.

The sense of concern about the environment and sustainability, and the support for things like green building, local food, bicycling, physical activity, and getting people outside—those things have risen in importance. As the problems become more serious, there's a lot more activity, but the planning solutions are not necessarily all that different from the ones we were talking about 20 years ago.

The language has changed, of course. But the message still is to planners that we, as a field, have a tremendous opportunity to help shape the future.

Whatever happens with the current economic situation, there will be growth and change of some sizable magnitude. The built environment will change. Planners have a tremendous opportunity to shape that, and profoundly reduce its ecological footprint, at the same time that we're creating enjoyable, livable places. It's probably the key reason that people get into planning in the first place: they want to make a difference in the world.

Are planning professionals still defining "sustainability" in the same way, now that the concept has entered the public consciousness and is a kind of marketing strategy for branding products and places?

I think the meaning has changed over time. It's interesting to think back on the environmental history of our country; you can argue that many of the green building ideas are not especially new—such as design features that were necessary in a period without fossil fuels, abundant energy, and electricity to power air conditioners and so on.

The early definitions of sustainability had more to do with land protection and conservation, which are still important concerns. The early conservation movement emphasized that we have a resource we shouldn't waste; we have to steward over it and manage it. One notion of sustainability is living off of that ecological interest and not eating into that capital, whether forest, or fishery, or topsoil.

Fast-forwarding to 1960s and 1970s, we begin to see an application of sustainability to the built environment. I've just had my students read *Ecotopia* [the 1975 utopian novel by Ernest Callenbach], in part because I wanted them to think of the idea of vision as

Christa Wagner is a candidate for a Master of City and Regional Planning degree in 2010, with specialization in Economic Development. This summer she is interning with SJF Advisory Services in Durham, NC.

a planning tool. It's an amazing foreshadowing of the sustainable cities that we're talking about today.

We've gone from sustainability being primarily about a wetland or a fishery, a natural resource or natural system, to something that's much more urban and about the built environment. Now sustainability has moved beyond a narrow constituency to address the whole range of things that affect people's lives.

We see the application of this idea to how you think about an urban neighborhood. The conservation agenda was applied in more affluent communities and often to higher-end developments and projects. There was a concern that this agenda doesn't connect to the way that average people live, more disadvantaged communities, or communities of color. That's changed dramatically. We're seeing that green rooftops, tree plantings, and community gardens aren't just amenities for rich neighborhoods; they are things that generate jobs, incomes, livelihoods, and hope. We haven't moved far enough in that direction, probably, but the emergence of increasingly good examples of affordable green design, for example, is a good thing.

Can you talk about your concept of resiliency?

Resilience is the new sustainability. That might be overstating it. Resiliency is a particular lens within that larger framework (of sustainability). It emerged in my

thinking in my career in the natural hazards area, working with [UNC emeritus faculty] David Godschalk, David Brower, and Ray Burby.

We used to talk about hazard mitigation, and then resilience came on the scene. It seems to describe what we're worried about. It allows [communities] to adapt to changing circumstances and shocks of various kinds, so that they can bend and not break. The term seems to allow people to support programs and policies. There's something intuitive about the term resilience or resiliency; maybe unlike sustainability, it has a common meaning. Such as, you want to make that building resilient, or that neighborhood or economy resilient.

The simple idea is that we can design and plan places that have the qualities that allow them to quickly and easily adapt to changing circumstances. There's a kind of perfect storm winding up, especially for cities. Everything from declining global oil supply to global climate change will be a big challenge for cities. Drought, water availability, coastal communities will experience sea level rise, hurricanes, and an increase in severe weather events. Layer on to that all of the economic shocks that are being experienced now, and what that means in terms of the resilience of families and individual lives.

With so many things happening at once, it really makes sense for us to think comprehensively about what a resilient city might look like.



Greenhouse at Abanitu Organics. *Photo courtesy of Bountiful Backyards, an edible landscaping business in Durham.*

One of your recent books, *Native to Nowhere*, examines the competing forces of globalization and localization in the efforts by communities to define themselves. Can you characterize your sense of that relationship?

It's a huge issue for us to try to sort out. We're now in a period where we're maybe rethinking the benefits of globalization. For the last couple of decades, we accepted globalization as this natural good thing that will bring many benefits, economic and otherwise. But we are and we ought to be rooted in actual places, the places we live.

I have always argued that planning is about finding, understanding, and appreciating those local roots, and nurturing them, fostering them, and finding creative ways to build commitment to place and to each other. There is a quality of life and meaning to life that can only be gotten at that local level.

We're at this interesting time where we're trying to navigate our commitments to global and local. Some are using the term "glocal," or "glocalism." The challenge is to find the right balance. To support glocalism means a kind of melding of the local and global. In the production of food and building materials, many things can be supplied locally or regionally. But our commitment to the local should not reflect disinterest in the larger world, or caring or commitment to the larger world.

A *Native to Nowhere* agenda is not about disconnecting from the world. Exactly what that balance will look like will depend on the place. There are lots of potential glocal futures. One is to support the people and cultures of other parts of the world through responsible consumption, like the fair trade idea but much more broad.

There are probably a thousand and one new ways to foster local-global relationships, like ecological sister cities, exchange programs, long-term contractual relationships that supply certain kinds of goods and services from another region, where it's not about buying at the cheapest price, but about buying a product or service that reflects long-term care about that place. Glocalism represents a new kind of philosophy for doing commerce in the world.

Your ideas are rooted in the city or the local place, and a great deal of your work responds to the places you have encountered across the globe. What's your favorite city?

There are two places where I have spent a lot of time and that I have written about. Leiden, in the Netherlands, has become a kind of second home for us. This is a place that combines a city looking to the future but rooted to its place and in the past, with virtually all of the qualities that I could ever have imagined that I would love, and enjoy

living in, and would be sustainable. It has everything from walking to bicycling to transit, with urban form that delights the eye, full of sensory experiences and smells and sounds.

The more recent place is a community where we lived in Australia, called Freemantle. It has many of the same qualities as Leiden, but with a different history and architecture.

I notice they're not in America. The question kind of implied international places.

The second part of the answer is about where I live here, Charlottesville, Virginia, my home of more than 20 years. It shares many of the qualities of these two international examples. Implicit in your question is almost this bias we have to seek out and identify places that are doing things that are progressive, or exemplary.

We spend a lot of time talking about best practices. But I think it's also important to recognize that a place doesn't have to rise to that level to deserve to be cared for and cared about and committed to. There will be something unique and something special anywhere. There will be a history to that place and that landscape that's worthy of knowing and exploring. No matter where you are, and how degraded—in some ways, those are the places that need the care and attention.

We don't talk enough about loving places. It may be hard to hug a place. But there are lots of ways we can show our commitment to and affection for places. One is simply by saying, "I live here. And I'm going to do what I can to intimately know this place, nurture and care for this place." That doesn't mean the buildings have to have photovoltaics on the roof or a sophisticated transit system. It's something we have to be careful about: we recognize the intrinsic value, and the possibility of a deep relationship to home, wherever we are and wherever we are living.

In planning, we're often looking at the best places, implying that the place you live in, if you live in Akron [Ohio], or Virginia Beach [Virginia], or Beaumont, Texas, can't be quite as special or important. But there will be a sacredness to those places, or there could be, if we only took the time to develop that sense about them. That's a long-winded way of saying that Charlottesville is as important as any other place to me.

What ideas or practices in the field, new or not, are currently exciting you?

There are so many right now, and so much potential to apply them, in navigating our way through this thicket of really severe challenges we're facing. Many of the things that are exciting to me are new ways to think about cities. Reimagining, for example, our energy



A green roof tops Chicago's City Hall. *Courtesy of World Business Chicago.*

production systems. Moving from this antiquated notion of fossil fuel-dependent energy production that's hugely inefficient, to a different model integrated into buildings and neighborhoods using many renewable energy technologies we have now. We need to take charge of energy production, incorporate it into where we live, and rethink everything in the built environment—every rooftop, façade, sidewalk, lighting structure. We should see everything as a potential opportunity to generate power. We need to design everything in the city based around an organic model—“Buildings like trees, cities like forests,” as [UVA architecture professor William] McDonough says.

Creative food production and vertical farming are promising ideas. Creatively rethinking about the land around buildings, such as the Boulder, Colorado farming of 12 suburban home lots—a “yard farm” idea. Churches, schools, and institutional land represent lots of opportunities to grow food. Edible landscaping. Urban orchards. This is really re-envisioning what cities are about; cities aren't just sucking in resources but are actually bountiful, and can grow more food than we need.

All the rethinking about infrastructure: a road becomes redefined as something that's not just about conveying traffic, but collects and treats storm water, and can grow food, and restore habitat. [It's] this concept of infrastructural nodes that are distributed across the city and can do many different things at once. You'd have a combined heat and power plant with a park on top and a facility for collecting

and treating wastewater from a neighborhood and extracting biogas that becomes a fuel. Doing all those things to cool the urban heat island effect.

Just as in nature: what can we learn from natural systems in designing and planning cities? Most things in nature don't do just one thing; they are able to do lots of different things, and that's partly what resilience is about. We have to begin to think about infrastructure in that new way, partly because we just can't afford it any longer. We need to layer different functions into a single space.

There will be a lot of new things we haven't thought of that will respond to our changing circumstances. We have to deal with amazing, biophysical forces, like sea level rise. It's a huge opportunity to rethink how we might design buildings, and creatively adapt to those changing biophysical conditions, finding new ways to use natural systems to do the work for us.

One big idea, in the vein of biomimicry, is this notion of seeing the city in terms of its metabolism, inputs and outputs, analogous to an organic system or a human body. We need certain things to run, and increasingly those things are often coming from very far away. That will have to change. Historically, we've seen these systems in very linear ways; the new idea will connect those inputs and outputs in a more circular, metabolic system closer to Nature. There's no concept of waste in Nature. That's a big idea: to use the principles of biomimicry to plan the city.