

A John King, Urbanist: Keep Nature Out of Cities

By Richard Register

648 words

John King's column on the future of downtown Berkeley (Chronicle, Tuesday May 15) represents an all too prevalent and self-righteous superiority evident in the fraternity of urban designers and the critics promoting them. They think cities have nothing to do with nature, that it's beneath the dignity of the urban realm.

Gary Larson best illustrates what I mean about. The characters in this cartoon are chickens at an art opening. Chickens are standing around with cocktail glasses, nibbling away at hors d'oeuvres, chattering with one another. Standing among them are chicken sculptures in various poses and on the walls chicken paintings, chicken prints, modern chickens, cubist chickens, impressionist chickens.

Is the city for people alone, for their self-referential conversation with themselves and devoid of relationship with the world outside? Lest we forget that human economy is built upon nature's economy, it's time to remind ourselves that today's city is at once the largest creation of humanity and humanity's worst assault upon nature. Not just any city, but the city of cars, sprawl and paving all driven by stupendous burning of cheap energy. We might just catch on too late that we have banished nature from our experience in our cities. Why climate change and why are we hurtling toward an energy crisis of no less than the end of all the available oil the planet could accumulate in 200 million years? For more than any other reason it's because we have ignored nature as we built cities. Cities could use a small dose of nature to remind us of all that. Our design imagination should be capable of creek restoration in urban centers, of even celebrating our relationship with water and its life-giving properties.

Why not a creek in downtown? John King thinks it's phony. Strawberry Creek is currently running through a concrete culvert a couple dozen yards south of Center Street. It didn't choose to be there. But to locate it elsewhere is illegitimate King believes.

A creek is as it functions in its hydrological and biological processes. The course of the creek is not the essential. When a landslide shifts a creek a hundred yards to one side does it cease to be a creek? Absolutely not. In short order it classifies its gravel, sand and mud in swirling deposits creating anchorage for plants and shelter for eggs of fish and insects and life starts coming back immediately. The first surge of water begins seeds and eggs and such mobile creatures as crawdads, dragonfly larvae and fish and birds that eat them. From the sun comes energy, from the air come birds and insects and more seeds. Animals approach to drink the water. Children come to play and adults to seek respite and just enjoy the sounds and smells of flowing, living water. All functions are on go from the moment the creek adjusts course.

A creek is a living environment, and there are infinite designs in which it functions perfectly well with its richly interconnected living systems. Those functions include aerating the water with its flow, filtering water with its plants, freshening the air above the stream, buffering floods with its capacity assisted by meander and wide places, providing habitat for dozens of species from aquatic and riparian to terrestrial and airborne: fish, crawdads, dragonflies, bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, providing crucial education about living systems to people of all ages and many other things.

When a creek is buried it ceases to be a creek in the essence of what a creek is. Everything dies. When opened to sky, sun and surrounding living environment and provided with an adjacent riparian landscape, even a small one, it is genuinely restored in that it's life and ecological systems and services all come back.

Think twice: if not “wondrous,” a misquote implying starry-eyed impracticality and attributed to me in Kings column, creeks could be at least wonderful in downtowns.

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