



Together We Grow. Designed By Jake Van Yahres and Painted by Christy Baker & Charlottesville High School Students. Photo by JD Brown.

The Natureful City: Nature in the New Normal

By Tim Beatley

More than two years into the COVID-19 global pandemic, it is a good chance to take stock of the role of nature in our lives. Anecdotally anyway, nature seems as important as ever in keeping our emotional balance and in steadying us during this continuing tumult. Walks outside, listening and watching birds, and paying close attention to the signals of seasonal change continue, for many of us, to provide solace and comfort as few other things can. Two-years

out, we also see that many of the improvised efforts to make outdoor spaces more available and accommodating are leading to permanent changes. This is a good sign. As we transition from the phase of global crisis, to perhaps the management of a more chronic and endemic threat, I hope we will find ourselves on a different, higher plane when it comes to the importance of nature in our lives and the commitments we make (and follow-through on) when it

comes to nature in cities.

We continue to be engaged in a wide variety of interesting efforts to incorporate nature in new ways into cities. These include serving on advisory boards for the large European-based ECOLOPES research project, the innovative Southwestern Medical District Urban Streetscape and Park Project, near Dallas, and Nature Canada's new Bird-Friendly Cities certification program, among many others.

These kinds of collaborations define much of the work we do as we try to extend and expand the impact of the biophilic cities' vision.

Most meetings and conferences continue online, and although we all have a heavy dose of Zoom fatigue, it has allowed us to participate in a variety of different events and communities, perhaps more than would have been possible if full travel was necessary. These have included a wonderful several days of our Biophilic Leadership Summit in November, an event we have collaborated in organizing this with our friends at the Biophilic Institute in the community of Serenbe. We are happy to be collaborating with the Biophilic Institute and to see them expand their impact and reach. One way they have been doing that is through a wonderful podcast called Biophilic Solutions, peaking at number 17 among Apple nature podcasts; the list of guests is impressive.

In the run-up to COP 26, we were asked by the World Bank to organize a webinar around biophilic city planning and design, part of their Bringing Nature to Cities. It was a wonderful panel, with presentations from Jane Weninger from partner city Toronto, Huberth Méndez Hernández from partner city Curridabat, Costa Rica, and conservation photographer Tamara Blazquez Haik from Mexico City. This was an important public event and one of many during this busy year.

With the publication of *The Bird-Friendly City* (Island Press, 2020), I have had the pleasure of presenting to audiences of bird lovers through major national venues (such as a webinar for the National Audubon Society) and many local bird clubs. I have been impressed that, as a rule, participants in these virtual events have been highly engaged and highly committed to birds, enjoying them yes, but also doing what they can to be a force on behalf of bird conservation. It has been an honor to be asked to speak to so many of these very locally-based groups, as a kind of honorary birder (I often say I can't claim the "birder" moniker, but I am a life-long bird lover!).

We have also created a Bird-Friendly City page on the main Biophilic Cities website, which will be a place for putting resources of many kinds for those working on behalf of birds. At the same time, we have begun to take steps to make our own University of Virginia School of Architecture campus more bird-friendly. In November, for

example, we hosted a visit by ornithologist and bird-building strike expert John Swaddle from the College of William and Mary. He walked with a group of UVA officials around our own Campbell Hall providing insights and suggestions for how we can retrofit the structure to reduce bird strikes. It has convinced me of the value and importance of undertaking this kind of bird-safe audit for all existing structures.

We continue to grow the Biophilic Cities Network in a number of ways. We are pleased that Miami-Dade County and the City of Raleigh have now officially joined as partners, in addition to an ever growing number of individual and organizational members of the network community. For partner cities, our monthly calls have become ever more interesting and engaging, with recent presentations ranging from the rights of nature (the story and lessons from the campaign to enact the Lake Erie Bill of Rights from Markie Miller), to the development of new tools





cities are using to support urban nature, including, for instance, Libby Phillips' presentation on Melbourne's Green Factor Tool.

These monthly partner calls are exceptionally stimulating and give the chance to gain exposure to different ways of thinking about biophilic cities. One of the most stimulating of presentations was one by Katie Patrick, consultant and author, who has written the popular (and highly readable) book *How to Save the World* (Blurb, 2019). One of the really important messages for me (from her talk and the book) was that education is simply not enough to generate change. This is a shocking realization for an academician who has spent multiple decades endeavoring to change the world

through teaching! As Patrick encourages, we must enlist what we know about behavioral psychology to bring about change.

A critical step in supporting positive change is thinking carefully about how we measure and define success? What are the most important metrics? When it comes to things like climate change, perhaps the metrics of success may be obvious: we want to see measurable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and, ultimately, we want to creep back from the precipice of 420 parts per millions of carbon in the atmosphere, a remarkable place to be now (atmospheric carbon levels not seen in 4 million years). But what about biophilic cities? How will we know we

have made discernible progress? It is an excellent question. At the level of the Network, of course, we tend to view success in terms of how many cities have joined (something easy to measure), and then in turn, how much progress these cities are making in protecting, growing and celebrating nature as a result of joining and participating in the activities of the Network (which is much harder to measure).

With these reservations in mind, we nevertheless continue to extend and expand our efforts at educating about biophilic planning and design. As imperfect as this is as a way of changing the world, it is a special province of our university base. In the last few months such new teaching

has included the offering (for the first time) of a Biophilic Cities Research Seminar at UVA (an in-person class co-taught with JD Brown) and a positive acknowledgement of the happy fact that graduate students are now drawn here in part because of our biophilic work. During the same period, we launched our first ever online Biophilic Cities short course (*Seeding the Biophilic City*), with an inaugural class of more 20 participants from a diverse range of global cities. We had an impressive list of guest presenters, including Vivek Shandas, Jacqueline Scott, Wolfgang Weisser, Helena van Vliet, and Nina Marie Lister, among others.

We had the pleasure as well of interacting with one of Nina Marie Lister's planning studios at Ryerson University, and serving as the client for a study of the codes and bylaws that govern what residents can plant in their yards. Born from the personal experience of bumping directly up against Toronto's Tall Grass and Weeds Bylaw, Lister has been an advocate for the right of homeowners to plant native gardens and an instrumental part in the city's decision to change its bylaw to better support this right. Lister's students have produced a highly informative study of Network cities, comparing their codes and approaches to the issue of native landscaping (and we will soon be making the class's final report available on the BC web page).

There is a growing desire on the part of young people around the world to stand up for nature, and

we are beginning to see this in the biophilic cities movement. An exciting case in point is a group of Miami area high school students who have become advocates and activists, calling for the greening of Miami-Dade schools. It is early in the process but impressively this group already organized a major Zoom event to discuss these ideas, which was attended by the City's new Heat Officer, Jane Gilbert, as well as Erick Laventure, Administrative Director of the Miami-Dade Schools.

We continue to look for ways to support expanded and more inclusive views of nature, especially marine nature. My book *Blue Urbanism* has now been translated into Korean, and in early January, I was happy to participate in a major conference that highlighted some of the key ideas for how coastal cities can advance this expanded view of the marine nature around them. There is a growing interest in ways that cities perched on the edge of the sea can be more fully engaged with and work on behalf of the remarkable



marine world nearby but often forgotten. As an example of this interest, I participated (again remotely) in a class called Semester by the Salish Sea, at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. Through a series of student-led discussions about how to effectively engage with the marine world, the students generated an extensive set of ideas for future action.

In January, we participated for the second year in the Waterfront Alliance's WEDG certification program. WEDG (standing for Waterfront Edge Design Guidelines) is an innovative set of voluntary design standards for coastal development, with an emphasis on resilient design, but that also includes biophilic ideas and principles. This year, the course was the largest ever cohort, some 200 participants taking the class and seeking WEDG credentials. This is a positive sign. As the WEDG standards begin to be applied beyond New York, we will likely see their influence expand. We are happy to be part of this growing movement for resilient and nature-centric coastal development.

I close with the very sad news at the end of 2021 of the deaths of EO Wilson and Tom Lovejoy. Wilson passed away the day after Christmas, and Lovejoy Christmas day. Wilson's death was for me especially shocking news; I think I had gotten used to the idea that Wilson, at 91, had someone eluded the process of aging and would continue (indefinitely) to author brilliant book after brilliant book. Wilson's ideas and

pioneering work of course lay the very foundation for our Network, and he was a strong supporter of biophilic design and planning (even writing the forward to my 2011 book *Biophilic Cities*). We owe him so much; especially in challenging us to care deeply about the natural world and the many "masterpieces" of life it contains, as well as his foresight and courage to advocate for world-changing conservation actions like Half-Earth that to some may have seemed fanciful. We will miss his defense of the small nature "that makes the world go round" and the big visions and bold steps that will be necessary to save the earth (and us). I cherish the times I had the chance to hear him speak. I regret one missed opportunity, when he visited UVA as the recipient of the Jefferson Medal in Architecture, in 2010. I had a speaking engagement myself that took me away, but my friend and colleague Landscape Architect Rueben Rainey made sure Wilson signed copies of several of the books of his that I owned. I will forever covet my copy of his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Ants*, (with Bert Hölldobler), signed in his distinctive way—a signature along with a small drawing above it of an ant.

Tom Lovejoy will be equally missed in the conservation world. I have one very vivid memory of sitting around a table at Maya Lin's New York City studio, along with Eric Sanderson, discussing the role of architects and planners in the protection of biodiversity. Later, at the height of the Amazonian fires

in 2019, we had a remarkable phone conversation, where he speculated broadly on what would be necessary ultimately to tackle this problem and the potential role of cities. "There will be no sustainable Amazon," Lovejoy told me that day, "until there are sustainable cities where people can get an adequate quality of life." Developing alternative livelihoods to the illegal harvesting of wood he thought was a critical step and he speculated about the unusual opportunities the region has to develop sustainable forms of aquaculture (many species of fish there are vegetarian), value-added forestry, and ecotourism, among others. And we need to do a better job monetizing the potential medical and health benefits of immense biodiversity found in Amazonia. ACE inhibitors, critical for many to lower blood pressure, he reminded me derive from the venom of local snakes like the Fer-de-lance. "No country with the Fer-de-Lance has ever gotten a penny in return," unfortunately, and so there is often little incentive for these countries to ensure the preservation of this biodiversity.

We will continue our work on behalf of nature truly inspired and guided by the legacies of Wilson and Lovejoy. Their deaths were shocking, coming so close together in time. But their lives and work are reminders of the remarkable roles each of us can play in speaking out for nature and in calling attention to the remarkable diversity and beauty of the natural world and the

many other lifeforms deserving of the space to grow and thrive.

Resources:

Bird Friendly City: A Certification Program. Nature Canada. <https://naturecanada.ca/defend-nature/how-you-help-us-take-action/bfc>.

Bringing Nature to Cities: Pathways to Integrated Urban Solutions for Climate Change & Biodiversity Loss. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/events/2021/09/01/Series-Bringing-Nature-2-Cities>.

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Miami-Dade County. Biophilic Cities Network Partner Page. <https://www.biophiliccities.org/miami-dade-county>.

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Southwestern Medical District Urban Streetscape and Park Project. <https://www.texastrees.org/projects/southwestern-medical-district>.

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