

Editorial

The City and the Tree – Redesigning Sustainability

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Today as I write these words the Buddhist world starting with Sri Lanka has begun celebrating one of its major festivals VESAK. 2600 years ago the Would-be Buddha on the full moon day of the Visakha month walked toward the sacred Bodhi-tree where he became Buddha – the fully enlightened One spending seven days in one posture experiencing the bliss of freedom.

In all world religions the tree and the forest play a major role as unconscious projections of man's spiritual longing for wholeness and freedom. This innate longing is reflected in the nostalgia for Paradise- the Celestial garden, represented in the structure of carpets and musical forms. In Persian miniature art we find the image of the Tree of Life and the Sacred River of unpolluted Waters of Life combined with motifs of expansion, ascent and flight. Islamic literature following the traditions of the Quran, likewise abound in the description of this celestial garden with the Celestial Tree, the Tuba or Sidra.

But the representation of the tree in art also contains a message of warning. A 15th century Persian miniature shows the tree under which Alexander the Great has taken rest during his conquest along the Silk Road. The tree, filled with heads

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of animals and birds talks to him, rebuking him for his ambition and prophesying his death in a country far from his native land. The boundless ambition of man, his insatiable craving for dominance has deafened him to the warnings of nature, that has been re-echoed again and again in the teachings of the great founders of religions, philosophers and poets. In a European miniature from the Middle Ages one finds mirrored the biblical vision of paradise with two trees – The *Tree of Life* and the *Tree of Knowledge*. The painting shows the *Good Tree* with branches growing from the stem of virtue (*Caritas*) and the *Bad Tree*, *Arbor Mala*, with twelve branches of vice growing from the stem of vice.



Figure 1. The Ta Prohm Temple in Cambodia.

In view of the looming ecological crises brought about by unhampered exploitation of the earth's natural resources the Tree of Life again assumes an important symbolic role in the ongoing fight for a more sustainable future. Some years ago I was able to witness the Tunggal Panaluan dance ritual among the Batak tribe in the city of Prapat on the shores of Lake Toba in Northern Sumatra. The Tunggal Panaluan is the mystic tree of life uniting the three worlds-upper, middle and lower, re-creating harmony between man and cosmos and creating a center for man, a point of contact between the outer and inner reality. Under the threat of irreversible destruction the planting of the tree of life during this ceremony outside of the former king's residence takes on the function of a forceful protest against the continued destruction of the natural habitat not only of Sumatra but the whole world.

Eco-disaster like the devastating flood hitting Thailand and its capital in 2011 calls for combined action by the central government and local administrators. The 10th Urban Culture Forum arranged by the Urban Research Plaza of the Faculty of Fine

and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University in cooperation with the Urban Cultural Research Center of Osaka City University showed the significant role that the art community and arts education can play both in implementing new ways for prevention and restoration.

From the Thai press on February 25, 2012 His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej is reported to have stressed the need for the government to plant trees and to make harsh punitive steps against greedy civil servants who allowed illegal deforestation to occur. He blamed the flood disaster on deforestation and obstruction of water flow (The Nation, Feb. 25, 2012).

This grave message from the King who is recognized as an expert for water and flood management actualizes similar warnings by one of the greatest innovative architects and artists of our times, the late Friedensreich Hundertwasser of Austria. Twenty years ago he issued the following warning to urban planners and rural administrators alike:

“When man thinks he has to correct nature, it is an irreversible mistake every time. A community should not consider it an honor how much spontaneous vegetation it destroys; it should rather be a point of honor for every community to protect as much of its natural landscape as possible. The brook, the river, the swamp, the riverside wetlands as they are, the way God created them must be sacred and inviolable to us. Correcting a stream only has evil effects, which are expensive in the end: the lowering of water tables, the destruction of forests, the transformation of large areas into steppes, no regeneration of water which runs off too fast.” Bangkok now pays a heavy price from decades of unhindered urban “development.”

By many Hundertwasser is today seen as the initiator and prime mover of the Green City Movement. Reforestation should begin in the city, where 70% of greenhouse gases are produced. It should like Hundertwasser has demonstrated (Hundertwasserhouse in Vienna) begin in every urban housing development as well.

The Thai government has already said it will heed the King’s advice on reforestation. The plan will include reforesting seven million rai of land over five years. But according to the press there is fear that the key players in this will be the private sector which has the know-how in the form of commercial tree farms, not regeneration of natural forest cover to serve as a natural sponge to prevent flooding. The greening of the cities will depend upon the insight and courage of city administrators.

Already the World Movement of Green Building is influencing ecological thinking and readiness for implementation in Thai cities. A main outcome of this thinking is the Urban Farm project, bringing farms nearer the city or even into the city (vertical farming). Urban farms can reduce both transportation costs and shortages when disasters strike. As The Nation (Bangkok) reports, it will provide a much needed supply chain and check runaway industrialization.

Returning to our introduction: The teaching of Buddhadasa will be our guide to a more sustainable future: “If we understand all aspects of nature and conserve the law of nature within ourselves...the external, physical aspect of nature will be able to conserve itself automatically” Cited from “Thailand and the World Movement of Green Building” by Dr. Tampon Panthasen, Faculty of Architecture, Kasetsart University, Bangkok.

Recommended Reading:

”Buddhism and Nature Conservation” by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh et. al. 1998 Thai Tibet Center, Phra Nakorn ISBN 974-616-90377-5-0.

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