



Opinion piece

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Tread Lightly

Recently, I visited a marshland near Vancouver. A narrow path of two planks, elevated above the sphagnum mosses and deep black water pools, moved me emotionally. The idea of treading lightly in an area resonates deeply with me. "Tread lightly"; it's a term that has been on my mind a lot lately. Why this term particularly appeals to me now is quite obvious. The state of nature, climate issues, and the decline in biodiversity—it also symbolizes personal reflection on how I live, how I design, and contemplation on the projects I've worked on in the last 20 years. The challenges we face painfully remind us that we shouldn't take from nature anymore but should give back, establishing a symbiotic relationship with the landscape and nature instead of a parasitic one.

Let me zoom out for a moment. As a thought experiment, but also to understand where we currently stand as a society and as individuals in relation to nature and the landscape. I believe that with the passage of time, further industrialization, and technological development, we are increasingly less restrained by the limits imposed by nature, geology, and other environmental factors. The larger the machines, the more massive the earthworks, the more disruptive the interventions in the landscape and nature. While in the past, we were guided by soil composition and elevation, as seen in old road structures and villages, now we

can build anywhere and draw lines through the landscape, as long as the economic interests are significant. We take this for granted, but it's not as straightforward as it seems, and climate change forces us to reestablish connections with natural boundaries, the flow of life, and hydrological principles.

The detachment from the underlying landscape and nature occurs at all scales. Globalization and internationalization often underlie this. It may have brought many positive aspects, but there's an inherent desire for something beyond our immediate environment, something exotic. On a garden level, think of palm trees and old olive trees in north European (often plundered from old cultural-historical landscapes in Italy and Spain) in small suburban gardens. The image of a palm tree against the backdrop of a gray, drizzling sky while setting up the Christmas tree indoors and rain tapping against the living room window makes me melancholic. I understand where it comes from. I get that people want a piece of vacation close to home, but it symbolizes the disconnection between humans and the landscape.

At a higher scale level (beyond the garden scale), there is still much ground to be gained, but I think the Netherlands and Europe, in many cases, set examples for the rest of the globe. In

British Columbia, Canada, where I live, I often see other examples of the disconnection between humans and the landscape. Take the village of Langford, near Victoria on Vancouver Island. It lies in a beautiful hilly area with many mixed forests, creeks, and moss-covered rock walls—a wonderful hiking area. But what does the municipal green authority do? They replace all grassy berms in the city center and along the axes into the village with artificial turf and plant a variety of cannas, annuals, and palm trees... Apart from the artificial turf (which should be banned!), I think it's a longing for Victorian garden architecture. I am convinced that this negatively influences collective and individual consciousness to a large extent. You create an unhealthy dream world and ignore the beauty of the landscape of which you are a part.

And then there's the internet, AI, social media, and the need for "instant gratification" that arises from them. These are all worrying things. Displacement and a distorted perception of time arise, leading to a desire to disconnect. When systems become too large, when life becomes too complex for the individual and the immediate social circle, simplification and a return to smaller systems become a natural tendency. "Making things small and simplifying, creating an overview and relative safety."

The issues mentioned above, climate change,

and the decline in biodiversity force us to look again at connecting to natural processes and the geology of a place. As far as I'm concerned, this is a significant advantage because it results in a deeper relationship with our surroundings. Both consciously and subconsciously. Respect for the power of nature is somewhat imposed on us. The vulnerability of existence becomes clearer, guiding us toward a more integral way of living and experiencing. In my opinion, it even enlarges our (valuable) relationship with transience, and we must question the concept of "manageability." The term "Tread Lightly" can be a good starting point. Every piece of green, every plant community, every ecosystem, no matter how small or large, is a living entity that you must first want to understand and observe with respect before making an intervention. It must be valued, and from an economic perspective, value must be assigned to it as well. Treading a terrain with respect makes us aware of the substrate and the factor of time. How can we design so that it treads lightly on the substrate? How can we design with less, with more restraint, with modesty? Treading lightly also means adopting a restrained attitude toward a design challenge. Can we work with what is there? Can we create the intended experience with minimal interventions? Can we achieve the desired ambitions with minimal earthworks, a closed soil balance, reuse, and minimal use of

new materials? Can we obtain resources locally, as we were forced to do in earlier times due to transportation limitations? And can we embrace vernacular architecture? Architecture/design that arises from the materials and crafts available in a particular region. Materials that often come from the local substrate and the local nature, naturally creating a connection with the landscape.

Finally, I find myself leaning more and more towards a restrained attitude towards wanting to control nature. Let's embrace an open attitude toward the adaptive capacity of nature. In these times of climate change, it's not just about rising temperatures, but especially about the whims that climate change brings. Longer dry periods, more extreme rainfall, and an ecological mismatch between flowering periods of plants and life cycles of insects make it difficult to plan plantings for the long term. This leads me to the belief that maybe we should also be restrained in planning vegetation and new plantings. Perhaps it's better now to create the conditions so that nature can take over. We can certainly help by creating favourable hydrological conditions and nutrient balance, but we can also strive for a dynamic, diverse, and non-fixed image. Letting go of control, observing, and intervening only when necessary.

I often think of the late renowned Canadian landscape architect Cornelia Oberlander. Her family has a small vacation home on Saturna Island, where I live. It's an island with more than 50% provincial park, and wild nature and unique ecosystems form the basis. People often asked her about garden advice and what they should do with their garden. What I understood from several stories is that her answer was always, don't do anything! Just let nature be.

By treading lightly on nature, we can often achieve more by doing less."



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