

Envisioning the natural city

The guest-editor's foreword

Ingrid Lemán Stefanovic

The author is Guest Editor for the present volume of Ekistics (vol. 71, nos. 424-426 and 427-429, 2004) on The Natural City. Dr Stefanovic agreed to serve as the Director for the new Centre for Environment, University of Toronto, commencing July 1, 2005, for a five-year term. She is the former Director of the Division of the Environment, one of the three units now integrated into the new Centre, and former Associate Chair for the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. Dr Stefanovic is a Professor of Philosophy, whose teaching and research focus on values and perceptions of environmental decision making. She has a 30-year teaching and research career in interdisciplinary fields, ranging from environmental ethics to urban planning and environmental policy development. Her most recent book is entitled Safeguarding Our Common Future: Rethinking Sustainable Development (SUNY, 2000). Dr Stefanovic, one of the earliest members of the World Society for Ekistics, having served on various occasions as member of the Executive Council and officer of the Society, was the organizer and acted as Chair of the international symposium on "The Natural City," 23-25 June, 2004, sponsored by the University of Toronto's Division of the Environment, Institute for Environmental Studies, and the World Society for Ekistics.

The move to embrace nature today is not a rejection of capitalism, consumerism and the city, as was perhaps the case in the 1960s and 1970s. It does not promote finding freedom on 50 acres in the wilderness or country. Instead, it is a movement to embrace nature in our lives in the city.

V. Schaefer, H. Rudd and J. Vala, *Urban Biodiversity*¹

My 80-year old father and I took a favorite walk together the other day. Crossing a busy Toronto intersection, we meandered into the University of Toronto campus – a world of stone buildings, wandering walkways, groves of stately elms and maples, and flower gardens with colors that dazzle. Moving through the quiet olfactory embrace of rose bushes and marigolds, our conversation moved effortlessly, agelessly. Passers-by included children, students and the elderly, moving in and out of our universe, never intruding upon the special space that the walk preserved between us. Looking upwards, my father remarked at the grey-blue ceiling of light cloud cover – and how much he preferred that to the picturesque cumulous images of picture postcards. A cheeky squirrel made us stop and remember fondly a walk along this same path 40 years ago when, as a child, I had fed an acorn with my father to one of this squirrel's ancestors: memories of years past wound themselves into an otherwise timeless moment.

In very many ways, our walk was through what I would call a "natural city." Certainly, the experience was defined by greenery and wildlife, from birds to dogs, raccoons and squirrels,

from flies to the extraordinary spider, weaving its exquisite web along the bench where we sat.

Four million residents inhabit Toronto, a city that is embedded in an ecologically rich landscape that hugs the shores of Lake Ontario, and is nestled within a pattern of ravines and a floodplain of three large rivers. The water that we drink from those rivers and the lake today has passed, for generations, through the soils, through other beings. We are joined, ecologically speaking, to others both in space and through time.

A natural city certainly demands a level of biological diversity to ensure good health, both of the ecosystems and the humans who inhabit them. However, the vision of a natural city invites us to think more broadly still. The walk that my father and I enjoyed was made more meaningful by virtue of the social and cultural milieu as well. Our own conversation was as peaceful, as meandering, as the landscape itself. Others who passed us – people of different racial and cultural traditions – implicitly reminded us that respect of difference, acceptance of difference, happens in this city more than in almost any other in the world.

The science of Ekistics teaches that, additionally, cities support technological, economic and regulatory functions as well. Significantly, my father and I were surrounded by the technological symbol of urban form – cars – but, because of the courtyard design of the spaces through which we moved, the evening rush hour buzz was dimmed by thoughtful campus design.

While North American society is defined by consumerism, our walk was also special because financial considerations could be set aside for the moment – and yet, it must be admitted that the beautifully tended landscape was only made possible by a strong University, city and national economy.

Even the regulatory function can be seen to have impacted upon our walk. Living in a free, democratic Canadian society, my father and I could move within a city of 4 million people, feeling safe, feeling at liberty to speak about anything that came to mind. Others around us could do the same.

In this regard, I am moved to admit that – in addition to the biological, social, cultural, technological, economic and regulatory functions – a natural city must also be understood as a *moral* phenomenon. It is more than merely an ecological inventory of species, no matter the number and diversity. The concept of "nature" has been studied by philosophers at many different levels and, clearly, to explore this concept in depth is beyond the parameters of this Foreword. Nevertheless, I am reminded that the Latin *natura* is derived from the verb "to grow," and "to be born." For the Ancient Greeks, nature emerges and abides as *physis* – which gathers together notions of origin, of the grace of the unspoiled and of goodness.



Fig. 1: Professor Ingrid Leman Stefanovic (middle), Chair of the international symposium on The Natural City in Toronto (23-25 June, 2004) at the inaugural plenary session with her father (right) Alexander B. Leman, President of the World Society for Ekistics, and P. Psomopoulos, Secretary General of the Society (left), presenting her with a marble copy of an ancient Cycladic statuette from Greece on behalf of all participants in recognition of and admiration for her overall effort in organizing the symposium.

When we speak of the natural city, the intent is to point towards such notions as well – of the authentic and the true, and of a grace and source of creation of a world that will always exceed the parameters of narrow human manipulations. Certainly, there is a hermeneutic element to this as well: the interpretation of what constitutes a “natural city” will always be partial, finite, and never universal.

Ecologically speaking, our walk was hardly in a *wilderness* environment and for some biologists, defining a university cam-

pus as “natural” is, at best, naïve. Equally, one can say more about the social, cultural, economic, technological, regulatory and moral elements of our walk.

Nevertheless, to describe the experience of a “natural city” is not to aim to present a universal prescription. Life and lived experience are far too complex for neat, compartmentalized manuals. For this reason, we must come at the concept of the natural city from many different angles.

This volume of *Ekistics* presents a broad collection of perspectives on this issue. It is only the beginning of a conversation that, we hope, will continue as we jointly seek to better understand the full breadth and depth of how to transform our human settlements into spaces that respect the moral laws of nature in all their complexity.

As a final point of indulgence, I ask the readers to allow me to dedicate the work that I have personally put into this journal, to my father, Alexander B. Leman, the 17th President² of the World Society for Ekistics, in the hope that our walks together will continue for many years to come.

Editor’s notes

1. Valentin Schaefer, Hillary Rudd and Jamie Vala, *Urban Diversity: Exploring Natural Habitat and its Value in Cities* (Ontario, Canada, Captus Press Inc., 2004), p. 14.
2. Presidents of the World Society for Ekistics:
 - Richard Llewelyn-Davies, 1967-1969
 - Margaret Mead, 1969-1971
 - Jean Gottmann, 1971-1973
 - Eiichi Isomura, 1973-1974
 - Robert Matthew, 1974-1975
 - R. Buckminster Fuller, 1975-1977
 - Felipe Herrera, 1977-1979
 - Thomas Lambo, 1979-1981
 - Earl Finbar Murphy, 1982-1984
 - Charles M. Haar, 1984-1987
 - Gerald B. Dix, 1987-1990
 - John G. Papaioannou, 1991-1993
 - Wu Liangyong, 1993-1995
 - Charles M. Correa, 1996-1997
 - Wesley W. Posvar, 1998-2000
 - Udo E. Simonis, 2000-2001
 - Alexander B. Leman, 2002-2004