

CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING PLACE

*No one can make ecological good sense for the planet. Everyone can
make ecological good sense locally, if the affection, the scale, the
knowledge, the tools, and the skills are right.¹*

Wendell Berry

Green-building innovations have moved steadily from the cutting edge to acceptance as best practices for the building industry. In a similar way, sustainable community development in locations around the world has generated a parallel list of best practices. Sustainability practitioners are often asked how their approaches might offer prototypes for use in other places.

But what if this tendency toward best practices were not the solution? What if it were actually part of the problem?

THE COMMODIFICATION OF PLACE

On the face of it, the promulgation of good practices and ideas seems sensible. Yet adopting these practices as universal standards has the insidious effect of transforming living communities into commodities. It flattens reality, ironing out the diversity that makes the places of the world unique, interesting, and resilient.

From the beginning of the Industrial Age, communities everywhere have been losing their distinctiveness and their ability to maintain coherence and integrity as living systems. Their natural features are paved over, starved for water, and polluted. Vernacular architecture is replaced by imported styles and generic materials. Green space has been reduced to public parks, with the same swing sets, tennis courts, and ball fields that can be found in any nearby community. Local cuisine and the indigenous foods that inspire it are slowly displaced by chain restaurants and the products of industrial agriculture. The result is the development of an increasingly homogenized world in which, as James Kunstler puts it, “Every place is like no place in particular”² (Figure 2.1).



FIGURE 2.1 Tract housing exemplifies the replacement of distinctive cultural features with imported styles and generic materials.

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It needn't be this way. In fact, no two places on the planet are the same. Local people know this. They can tell you the boundaries of their neighborhoods and point to the things that most truly reflect their authentic characters. This way of understanding place, as attenuated as it is becoming, is still alive in our human experience (Figure 2.2).



FIGURE 2.2 Historic housing in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana, expresses the cultural legacy and vibrant daily life of the neighborhood.

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The special places on Earth, the ones that draw us to visit and write about them, have learned to sustain their integrity as living systems. The people who live in these places do this by celebrating and evolving their local cultures through successive generations. They adorn their buildings and streets, their clothing and food, to reflect their distinctive identities. This ongoing celebration reinforces the values that communities wish to perpetuate. It sets the norms for economic and social practices and helps harmonize them with local ecosystems. The affection we hold for these places, where the relationships among people, nature, architecture, and culture are mutually reinforcing, helps protect them from the erosive forces of globalization.

Love of place offers an antidote to the homogenization of towns, cities, and landscapes. For this reason, it is a critical piece of the sustainability puzzle because it offers the motivation needed to reintroduce regenerative practices into all of our endeavors.

This realization leads to a second basic premise of regenerative development: *Co-evolution among humans and natural systems can only be undertaken in specific places, using approaches that are precisely fitted to them.* If we wish to engage in co-evolutionary partnerships with nature, we must do so place by place, discovering opportunities and solutions that are indigenous rather than generic.

Premise Two: Co-evolution among humans and natural systems can only be undertaken in specific places, using approaches that are precisely fitted to them.

The age of industrialization has produced remarkable efficiencies in global production and consumption. But these efficiencies are mechanical rather than ecological, the result of oversimplified thinking about how nature and the world work. These efficiencies have come at the cost of rapidly degrading natural, social, and cultural wealth. John Lyle, one of the pioneers of regenerative thinking, once wrote, "Where nature evolved an ever-varying, endlessly complex network of unique places adapted to local conditions . . . humans have designed readily manageable uniformity . . . [replacing] billions of years of evolution with a simpler, more direct, and immensely powerful design of human devising."³

As a result, we have forgotten how to understand and live in "right relationship" to our places.⁴ David Orr describes this phenomenon as becoming residents rather than inhabitants. Residency requires only cash and a map, while an inhabitant "dwells . . . in an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with a place. Good inhabitation is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness."⁵

Place is one of those rare concepts in the English language that embraces both the human and natural worlds. It comprises all of the multitudinous interactions among nature and culture, interactions that can be found in urban and rural settings alike. Every place is a living whole with its own distinctive spirit.

The proliferation of places, each different from any other, represents a key strategy for the planet as a living system, a diversified portfolio of investments. The innovation and experimentation that this diversity enables is necessary for the evolution of natural and cultural systems alike.

■ AN APPROACH TO PLACE

The ground for regenerative development is an understanding of place. What makes each place unique? What gives it vitality? Viability? What is the source of its potential and, therefore, of its capacity to evolve? With this understanding it becomes possible to tailor sustainable design strategies and processes that are harmonious with the character of a specific place. The streets of Manhattan, the vineyards of Languedoc, the wilds of the Altiplano—these are very different places and their differences demand respect and appreciation. Each expresses a unique and dynamic interplay between humans and nature that designers and community leaders can creatively harness for the benefit of all.

Regenerative development returns place to its core position in human life, making it a touchstone of shared meaning and caring that can enable people to make common cause with one another and with nature. Real communities are, in the words of David Orr, “places in which the bonds between people and those between people and the natural world create a pattern of connectedness, responsibility, and mutual need.”⁶

■ TRANSFORMATIONAL LEVERAGE

In the context of regenerative development, the word *place* means far more than its customary usage in the fields of architecture, planning, or community development. Although it encompasses local economies and food systems, vernacular architecture, wildlife, and native plant communities, it also includes subjective experience. Place is more than material reality; for many people it is also the holder of deep emotional attachment.

For this reason, place offers a context that is meaningful to people, one that they can comprehend and care about. It is the “right scale of whole” for people to work on, providing an arena within which they can successfully take on the

challenges that we are facing together as a species. Thus it represents a powerful strategic leverage point for transforming the ways we live on Earth. This is why the second principle of regenerative development is to *partner with place*.

Principle Two: Partner with place.

Place serves as the laboratory and learning environment for developing community intelligence about how to live in harmony with natural systems. Regardless of the general principles governing ecosystems, agriculture, political science, or forest and fisheries management, the particulars are always irreplaceably local. This is why, from the perspective of living harmoniously with the planet, it is such a serious loss when local or indigenous knowledge dies out. As Wendell Berry describes it:

The loss of local culture is, in part, a practical loss and an economic one. For one thing, such a culture contains, and conveys to succeeding generations, the history of the use of the place and the knowledge of how the place may be lived in and used. For another, the pattern of reminding implies affection for the place and respect for it, and so, finally, the local culture will carry the knowledge of how the place may be well and lovingly used, and also the implicit command to use it only well and lovingly. The only true and effective “operator’s manual for spaceship earth” is not a book that any human will ever write; it is hundreds of thousands of local cultures.⁷

Understanding place as a whole, encompassing all living beings, gives us an opportunity to heal our alienation. As Michael Jones has said, “A sense of place offers a unifying story that weaves together our relationship with nature, art, and community and inspires us to re-imagine, not only how we live and lead but the nature of the universe itself.”⁸ Scholars and philosophers like Ivan Illich, John Cameron, René Dubos, and Peter Berg have long argued that it is only in relationship to place that humans experience a sense of intimacy and responsibility with regard to the world. From this they make meaningful identities and roles for themselves.

Crucially, place is a doorway into caring. People can and do care about their places. “Rootedness in a place,” wrote Simone Weil “is the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” Love of place taps into the personal

and political will needed to make profound change. It can also unite people from across diverse ideological spectra because place is what all local people share. It is the commons that allows them to call themselves a community. The imperative to conserve or restore what is precious in a shared place can provide the higher-order purpose and sense of direction that reconciles a host of differences.

■ BECOMING PARTNERS

Partnering with place implies a relationship between living entities. We can be good stewards of the objects in our life—our house, car, clothing, etc.—using them well and maintaining them. But insofar as they are objects, we would never relate to them as partners. The first fundamental step to designing projects that can partner with place is to understand that *place is alive*.

Partnership is relational rather than transactional. In her book, *Tending the Wild*, Kat Anderson captures the indigenous worldview of the native peoples of California, who emphasize their necessary relatedness and participation with nature.

Wilderness is a negative label for land that has not been taken care of by humans for a long time. . . . California Indians believe that when humans are gone from an area long enough, they lose the practical knowledge about correct interaction, and the plants and animals retreat spiritually from the earth or hide from humans. When intimate interaction ceases, the continuity of knowledge passed down through generations, is broken, and the land becomes “wilderness.”⁹

Because partnership is relational, it moves us beyond the paternalism of protection and preservation. Conservationist Peter Forbes has noted that:

. . . 42 percent of the private land in America is posted *No Trespassing*. And nearly 80 percent of land “protected” by private conservation organizations is posted *No Trespassing*. . . . Saving land while losing human understanding of the land, what lives there, why it needs to be part of our lives, what it has meant throughout history is to create conflict. . . . As a nation and as a movement, we’ve spent too much time separating

people and the land and precious little time being in dialogue about what defines a healthy relationship between the two.¹⁰

RENEWING THE SOURCE

The award-winning Springs Preserve in Las Vegas, Nevada, is an example of what can result when a design focus shifts from preserving to partnering. The preserve is a unique natural area located in the historic heart of Las Vegas, Nevada. It includes a Desert Living Center and Sustainability Gallery, the Nevada State Museum, Origen Museum, the University of Las Vegas DesertSol Solar House, a butterfly habitat, botanical and conservation gardens, a recreated spring pool, and extensive trails. It also houses a reservoir and pumping station that delivers potable water to much of the metropolitan area. The site is important archaeologically, historically, and culturally (Figures 2.3 and 2.4).

An abundance of sustainable and appropriate technologies integrate the preserve into the hot dry climate of the Mojave Desert. Passive solar design, rammed earth and straw bale construction, biological wastewater treatment, grid-tied photovoltaics, protection of archaeological and biological resources, and native plant landscaping have all contributed to earning it a platinum certification from the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED program. Equally important, the project is locally beloved and has become one of the city's most popular destinations. Las Vegas residents come to the preserve to learn how to incorporate water conservation and sustainable practices into their daily lives. In this way, it has positioned itself as an advocate, promoting conservation and appreciation of the desert environment as a special place to live.

The project was initially conceived as a fairly conventional demonstration site for desert gardening. A turning point came when the Las Vegas Valley Water Authority realized that it needed to shift its thinking from building a project that was *in* the desert to building one that was *of* the desert. With this shift in attitude and perspective the design team, led by the Las Vegas firm LGA, began to create something that would serve as a regenerative force.

An interdisciplinary design team that included architects, landscape architects, engineers, biologists, hydrologists, sustainability experts, and community stakeholders worked together to realize this vision. Much of the leadership



FIGURE 2.3 An architectural rendering showing the layout of botanical and conservation gardens at Springs Preserve in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Courtesy LGA

was provided by Patricia Mulroy of the Las Vegas Valley Water Authority. Before accepting a position at the Brookings Institute, Mulroy had earned a national reputation as the “Water Witch of Las Vegas.” As manager of all the water resources for one of America’s fastest growing cities, she demonstrated a



FIGURE 2.4 The Desert Living Center and Sustainability Gallery at Springs Preserve.
Courtesy LGA

formidable grasp of the complexities and strategic challenges raised by intense dryland development in an age of climate change. Early on, she recognized that life in a world of water scarcity was going to require more than technological solutions. It was going to require the emergence of a new culture.

Among the land holdings of Mulroy's agency was a jewel hidden in plain sight—180 acres in the heart of the city. The site housed a well field, storage tanks, and water treatment plant, and was surrounded by industrial neighborhoods. For generations it had served as a kind of open space, an unsupervised refuge for teenagers and young lovers. In the 1980s local preservationists had quietly worked with the water district to secure its historic status, but it remained dormant with regard to public engagement until the mid-1990s. The question was what to do with it.

The site contains a complex of artesian springs—a true oasis in the desert. Archaeological evidence indicates an Anasazi presence in the area, followed by the southern Paiute for whom the springs were a major water source. The Spanish encountered the lush grasslands of this oasis and gave the area its name, *Las Vegas*, which means *the meadows*. It was a major campsite on the Spanish trail, which provided an east-west link to the far-flung Spanish empire

in the American southwest. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Mormons settled the area just downstream of the springs. Later, the site became an important stop on the railroad that connected Salt Lake City to Los Angeles. At the beginning of the twentieth century, developers from Los Angeles, in connection with the railroads, finally established the city of Las Vegas (Figure 2.5).



FIGURE 2.5 Botanical gardens at the Springs Preserve featuring local native plants.

Courtesy LGA

Recognizing that Las Vegas' water use was shortsighted, Mulroy knew that this project needed to catalyze a shift in the city toward a culture of sustainability. She encouraged the project team to engage in a planning process whose focus was community development rather than site development. She wanted to grow new capability within the water district, and that would require bringing together a larger than usual circle of stakeholders.

The team very quickly uncovered a profound conflict. Some wanted to preserve the site and its wealth of archeological and biological resources, while others wanted to open it to visitors and provide them with interpretation of these resources. This conflict was eventually reconciled by highlighting the historical and cultural significance of the site to the region as a whole. All parties agreed that the best way to preserve precious resources was to influence the way people live in this place.

Anchoring the project in place, making it of the desert, eventually influenced the design and building of all of its components. Every one of them was prohibited by Las Vegas' existing land use and building codes, but what was trying to come to be on the site was compelling and self-evidently appropriate. This led the various government agencies involved to adopt new codes that allowed building to go forward. Subcontractors were so proud of their participation that they would often sneak their families onto the construction site after hours. They knew that they were not just building structures; they were building community. Even before ground was broken, the project began to earn public affection and enthusiasm because it brought people into partnership with their history and ecology.

When the Springs Preserve opened its doors in 2007, its features and location attracted national attention. A visionary ecological project was so unlike the associations that most of the public have with Las Vegas—a neon playground for nightlife and high-stakes gambling—that people couldn't help but observe, "If it can happen here, it can happen anywhere!" This was one time when what happened in Las Vegas didn't need to stay in Las Vegas (Figure 2.6).



FIGURE 2.6 An aerial view of Springs Preserve in the construction phase, showing its location within the city in relation to the downtown strip.

Courtesy LGA

PLACE AS LIVING SYSTEM

Scientist and essayist René Dubos, author of the catchphrase “Think Globally, Act Locally,” advocated that issues involving the environment must be addressed within their unique physical, climatic, and cultural contexts. “Each particular place,” noted Dubos, “is the continuously evolving expression of a highly complex set of forces—inanimate and living—which become integrated into an organic whole.”¹¹ In other words, places are dynamic and understanding them presents special challenges. Learning to recognize and read key patterns can greatly facilitate this work. The following three sets—patterns of nestedness, patterns of interaction, and essence patterns—are characteristic of living systems and enable insight into the uniqueness of places.

PATTERNS OF NESTEDNESS

All living systems are made of smaller systems nested within larger systems. For example, in a human body, a muscle cell is nested within a heart, which is nested within a circulatory system (Figure 2.7). All of these levels of system are whole and distinct from one another, and at the same time, they are dynamically interdependent and inseparable.

Living systems are open; they interact and co-evolve (or co-devolve) with their environments. Nestedness implies that there is a mutuality of interest among their different levels, based on the energies they exchange. Although organisms are at once complete, independent, and autonomous, they are also interdependent with other life forms.

Nature depends upon connections through different levels of biological organization. There is an unbroken continuum from cell to organism to ecosystem to bioregion and ultimately to the whole planet. “Systemic health,” notes Daniel Wahl, “is a scale-linking, emergent property of healthy interactions and relationships within complex dynamic systems. The health of human beings, societies, ecosystems and the planetary life support system is fundamentally interconnected and interdependent.”¹² If the health of one level of system declines, it affects the health of the other levels. A problem in the heart can adversely affect the entire body. An illness in the body can impact the health of the heart.

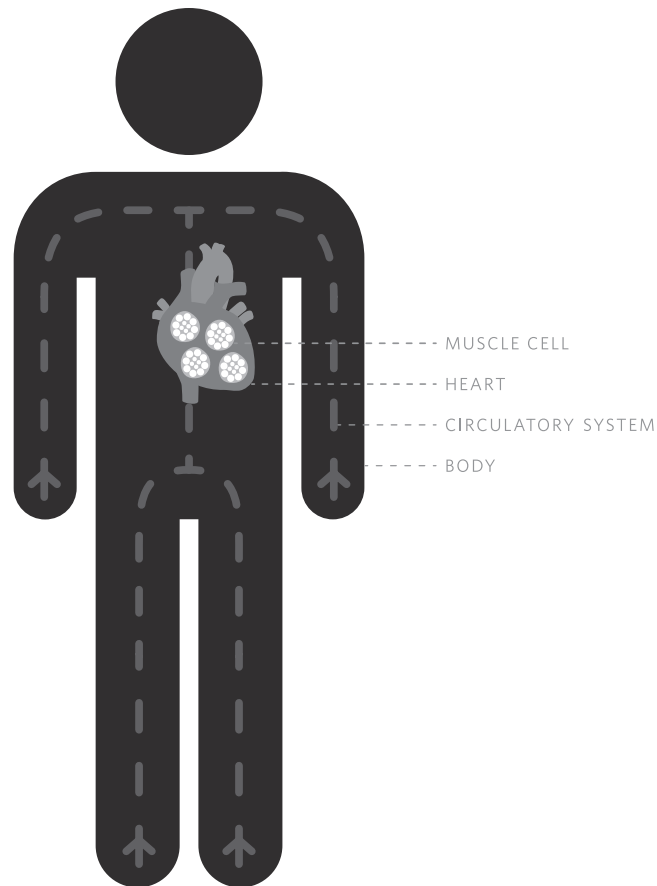


FIGURE 2.7 Living systems are made of smaller systems nested within larger systems. Within a human body, a muscle cell is nested within a heart, which is nested within a circulatory system. (The body, in turn, is nested within a family, a larger community, and an ecosystem.)

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As living systems, places can be understood in terms of patterns of nestedness. A neighborhood or district might be nested within a city, which is nested within a watershed. As with the human body, these different levels of system are interdependent and inseparable. They don't just influence one another. They can no more exist or change independently of one another than a heart and its body can.

Many cities exhibited this dynamic interdependence following the collapse of the housing market in 2008. An abandoned house would begin to affect property prices, foreclosures would spread, and formerly healthy neighborhoods would begin to deteriorate. This would decrease income from property taxes, jeopardizing city services and further advancing the cycle of decay.

Creating a project that is regenerative requires understanding its patterns of nestedness, precisely because it is the systems within which it is nested that it will regenerate. How one defines these systems depends on what it is working on. An urban school is likely to affect its neighborhood and therefore the larger community surrounding that neighborhood. A rural school might affect several small communities located within a watershed. Each school will play a different role, based on its integration within a unique set of nested systems.

PATTERNS OF INTERACTION

Living systems are sustained by a host of interactions among diverse forces. Places, for example, are undergirded by a slowly shifting geological substrate of rocks, soils, and the spaces between them. This substrate interacts with climatic forces that wear down mountains and build up deposits of soil. Soils are further developed through their interactions with microorganisms, fungi, plants, and animals. This builds their fertility and provides a matrix for ever-increasing complexity of ecological expression, including the emergence of human habitat and culture.

These patterns of interactions can be traced backward and forward. The underlying basement of parent stone is still present even after it has been layered over with millions or even billions of years of accumulated materials. It continues to exert an influence, contributing its mineral imprint to the human communities that live above it. It helps determine the quality of the water they drink and the food they eat and, therefore, the way they live.

Virtually everything on Earth can be understood as the trace or a residue of some pattern of interaction. The Yucatan peninsula of Mexico is a great barrier reef made by living organisms, carved into its present shape by a giant meteor, riddled through with subterranean channels and caverns, overlaid by jungle and thousands of years of Mayan culture, and surging with

underground rivers that surface in the form of small freshwater lakes of enormous depth. In spite of its placid surface, evidence of movement, growth, and hidden potential is everywhere.

ESSENCE PATTERNS

Essence can be defined as the true nature or distinctive character that makes something what it is; the permanent versus the accidental element of being. Architect Christopher Alexander calls it “the quality without a name . . . [the] central quality which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a man, a town, a building or a wilderness.”¹³ In a 2011 interview, Moshe Safde commented that, “As an architect, you have to understand the essence of a place and create a building that resonates with that.”¹⁴

Essence can seem abstruse and esoteric until we see it at work in a family or personal context. The more deeply we understand the essence of a child, for example, the better able we are to discern the conditions in which she is likely to thrive. When an appreciation of essence informs a friendship, it enables fuller realization of each person’s potential.

Places also have essences, identities, characters, and purposes. René Dubos described this phenomenon as, “spirit of place . . . the living ecological relationship between a particular location and the persons who have derived from it and added to it the various aspects of their humanness.”¹⁵ Berlin could never be mistaken for Los Angeles, and neither could be confused with Istanbul, in spite of the superficial similarities shared by urban centers everywhere. In the same way, the qualities that make the great plains of Central Asia and the great plains of North America similar, only serve to underscore their profound differences.

Spirit has to do with essence, soul, defining attributes, life-giving principles, underlying animating structure. What gives a place its core and center of gravity? That which, if altered or taken away, would change the place fundamentally into something else. That which permeates and infuses place. What embodies place spirit? Represents or holds its essence? What stands for the physicality, materiality of place but its people and activity?¹⁶

Although places may appear similar on the surface, in fact each has a unique and distinct being. Until this essence becomes known, it is easily confused with superficial appearances. Italianate villas in the hills of California or half-timbered estates in Connecticut might sell well, but in those settings they are not necessarily authentic reflections of place. Edward Relph, author of the seminal work *Place and Placelessness*, condemned these inventions and manipulations as “exercises in duplicity. They are superficial acts of plagiarism that reveal a lack of confidence, a lack of originality, and uncertainty of any purpose except the one of making money.”¹⁷

It is possible to discover the ongoing and distinctive core patterns that organize the dynamics of a given place. These core patterns are the source of its recognizable character and nature—its essence. They influence the complex relationships that produce its activities, growth, and evolution. When seeking to identify these core patterns, *Regenesis* asks three questions: How does this place organize and renew itself? What does it consistently pursue? What value does it generate as a result?

CREATING AN ICON

Central Park in McAllen, Texas, illustrates how discovering nestedness and essence of place can help shape a regenerative project. McAllen is a thriving, business-oriented city located in the Rio Grande estuary near the border with Mexico. City planners recently partnered with a developer to transform an abandoned, 67-acre reservoir located in the center of town next to a mixed-use park and recreational center. Conceived as a keystone in the city’s effort to revitalize its urban core, the project was intended to reflect McAllen’s status and direction as a regional leader. It was also intended to re-awaken a connection to the community’s cultural heritage.

The city had developed a list of goals, based on the notion of a new town center that included attracting visitors, providing entertainment that would appeal to wealthy residents, and raising gross receipts tax income from high-end restaurants, stores, and events. At the same time, nearly everyone involved wanted the project to be an “icon of the future of McAllen,” a reflection of its essence that would help strengthen its values and principles. Rather

than simply adopting goals that could have been set by any municipality seeking to grow its economy, the developer invited RegenesiS to explore the essence of place as a basis for the park's design.

DISCOVERING ESSENCE

The RegenesiS team interviewed city officials, naturalists, environmental scientists and scholars, archeologists, anthropologists and cultural historians, respected elders, cultural and social activists, thought leaders, project stakeholders, and many others, all of whom had a stake in "dreaming forward" the city and region as a whole. The team members also toured the city and visited sites where characteristic ecological patterns could be observed. This yielded an overview of dynamics and history, both human and natural. Of particular interest were those places where ecological and human patterns mirrored each other.

The team was initially puzzled by the fact that McAllen's location is always officially described as the "Lower Rio Grande Valley," in spite of its location in a delta. There was no valley anywhere in the region. Then they discovered that early settlers from Mexico felt that *valley* sounded more inviting to tourists and northern investors than *delta*.

Current residents, on the other hand, describe themselves and McAllen as nested in the "Rioplex," the delta area that extends north and south of the Rio Grande and encompasses the drainage area on both sides of the border. Many feel more affinity with the Mexican city Reynosa, just a few miles from them, than they do with Brownsville, located an hour away (Figure 2.8) on the Texas side of the border. This integrative quality, which ignores the arbitrary divisions of state and national boundaries, is core to the character of this place. McAllen, the RegenesiS team proposed, exhibits a "Spirit of Non-apartness."

As the research progressed, three core patterns appeared. Together they pointed to essence, as reflected in McAllen's geological, biological, and human histories. The team named these patterns "dynamic flowing," "stabilizing nets," and "living mosaic."

Dynamic flowing is how the Rioplex renews itself. Unlike a valley, which has two distinct sides, a delta is essentially a floodplain, a weave of channels and side channels, which change from season to season and year to year. In



FIGURE 2.8 The location of McAllen, Texas, on the Rio Grande estuary at the Gulf of Mexico.

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the Rio Grande Delta, it is difficult to tell where the international border lies because the location of the river changes frequently. In the same way, it is hard to say where the water ends and the land begins. Monsoon rains drive periodic cycles of downstream flooding. Hurricanes drive water upstream from the Gulf.

Seasonal migrations of animals, birds, and fish cross and re-cross the landscape in pulses that mimic the water surging through this fluid terrain. These natural pulses are mirrored in the human history of the region. At times the back-and-forth flow of different human populations has influenced and even redefined McAllen's social, political, and economic landscapes. Immigrants and invasions periodically moved across the area, spreading out and interweaving with previous cultures. Like the waters of the river, each human flood left behind new resources and cultural richness, just as deposits from the floodwaters enriched the soils. This interweaving is reflected in a city where hard divides and divisiveness are antithetical to the way of life.

Stabilizing nets enable communities to thrive in this place of dynamic flows and floods. As the waters of the Rio Grande surge through the delta, the response of plant life is to form webs of roots, which slow and spread the water, allowing suspended soils and nutrients to settle and nourish the ecosystem. Even the land itself is organized in a web-like pattern of hummocks, shoals, and braiding channels, all of which together act as a brake on the erosive force of floodwater.

Human communities in and near the Rioplex have themselves responded to the pulses of change in conserving and renewing ways. They have formed stabilizing social networks to allow their cultures and livelihoods to thrive rather than be swept away in periods of war, human migration, and isolation. These adaptive, family-like connections have sustained a resilient community. Local people reported that they treasure McAllen's "slow, intimate, small hometown feel," its culture of cross-generational cooperation and traditions of volunteer activism. Even McAllen's settlement pattern is web-like, comprising a network of centers or "downtowns," each with its own unique qualities and distinctive importance.

Living mosaic is the pattern through which this place integrates diversity and creates wealth within what could otherwise be a chaotic environment. The Rioplex is an oasis, a lush multistoried jungle bounded to the north and south by deserts. It sits in one of the most biodiverse regions in the United States and contains a rich mosaic of soils that have been distributed across the landscape. Each of these soils sustains its own distinct biological community. In the same way, a diverse mosaic of cultures has formed in the area. The juxtaposition and blending of these variegated elements are the source of the variety and vibrancy of exchanges that enrich the community. When asked what truly characterizes his city, McAllen's mayor responded, "We treasure difference, diversity."

A HEALING ROLE

The Central Park developer had asked a New Urbanist design team led by Jeff Speck to conduct a five-day master planning workshop. The three core patterns were presented, and community members were asked if they were true to their experience. They responded with stories, describing the ways these patterns

had played out in their own lives and the lives of their parents and grandparents. From these, the planning team extracted a set of guiding concepts.

- Welcome all ages, incomes, cultures, and languages.
- Build adaptable, well-defined spaces for a variety of uses and users.
- Make transitions between spaces gradual; avoid abrupt edges.
- Foster entrepreneurial and cultural talent.
- Reflect living water, farming heritage, ecology, and diverse cultures of the region.
- Educate and inspire; make the community's underlying values explicit.
- Integrate the global and local, the unique and the branded.

The town of McAllen has always organized itself to work like a delta, enabling exchanges among its economically and culturally diverse constituencies and visitors. Although the people of McAllen might have been expected to develop a closed, barricaded approach to these intrusions, the opposite seemed to be true. McAllen's residents liked to say, "You can get closer quicker here." The city had welcomed successive generations of newcomers into its family-like networks, creating a wealth of social capital and resilience in the face of change.

But this pattern had been disrupted on multiple fronts. The proposed border wall to separate the United States and Mexico posed significant challenges. Efforts to protect communities from flooding were upsetting the delta's ecological balance and severing the deep historical connection to the river. And the social porosity that had made the place work in the past was threatened as increasing numbers of gated communities sprang up, walling off exclusive areas from the rest of the town. Ironically, these efforts to protect the region against the dynamic flows that had shaped it were undermining its sources of renewal and regeneration.

Based on these insights, a role for the Central Park began to emerge. It needed to shed light on the underlying patterns of place and be an embodiment of the democratic exchanges that made it work. Instead of the original vision of an Epcot-like entertainment and retail center, a new design was proposed, one that would attract all segments of society, whether they had money or not. Its organizing idea was to bring people from all walks of life back into contact with water and each other (Figures 2.9 and 2.10).

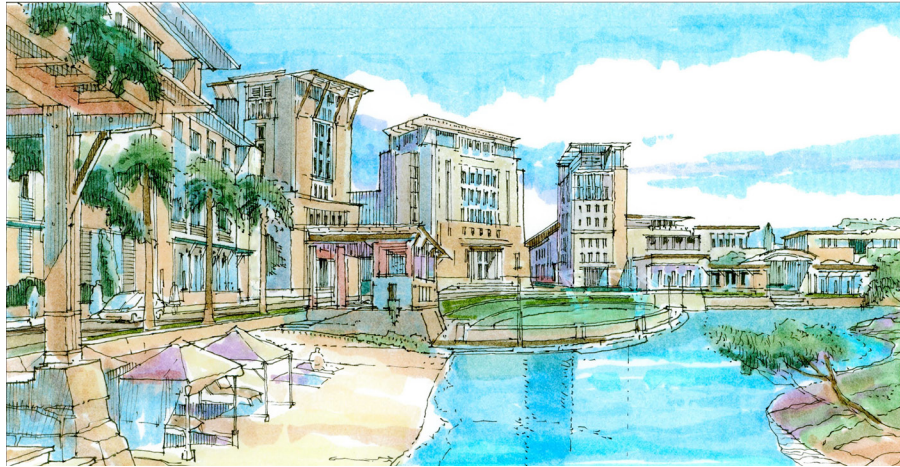


FIGURE 2.9 The organizing idea for Central Park was to bring people from all walks of life into contact with water and each other.

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FIGURE 2.10 Water became a central element of the proposed plan.

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Design features included a water park, river walk, and biological water treatment system. Everything from fine dining to free water play to downtown apartments would be available, in order to encourage the mixing that was essential to the vitality of the town. By encouraging a diversity of economic and social transactions, the city would be able to achieve its high-end entertainment and tax revenue goals without undermining its core character. Not coincidentally, the pattern represented by this alternative vision for Central Park was of immediate interest to the city's powerful neighborhood associations. They could see the relevance of this planning approach as an antidote to the problem with gated communities that they were facing.

Because the project was place-sourced rather than just another trendy downtown redevelopment, it had a clear role that it could play well. As an icon for the future McAllen, it reconnected people to the rich legacy that had always been the source of strength and success for the town and its region.

■ GUIDELINES FOR APPLYING THE PRINCIPLE

Discovering the key patterns that can facilitate understanding a place as a living whole requires synthesizing diverse kinds of information. This work can be greatly facilitated by three somewhat unusual questions. *"How big is here?"* looks at place through the lens of nested systems. *"How does here work?"* relates to patterns of interaction. *"What kind of here is this?"* brings in the aspect of essence.

HOW BIG IS HERE?

It can be tricky to find the right nested systems for a project. One needs to identify the appropriate scale within which it can have a meaningful influence. As a starting point, Regeneration uses a relatively simple framework that shows three levels (Figure 2.11).

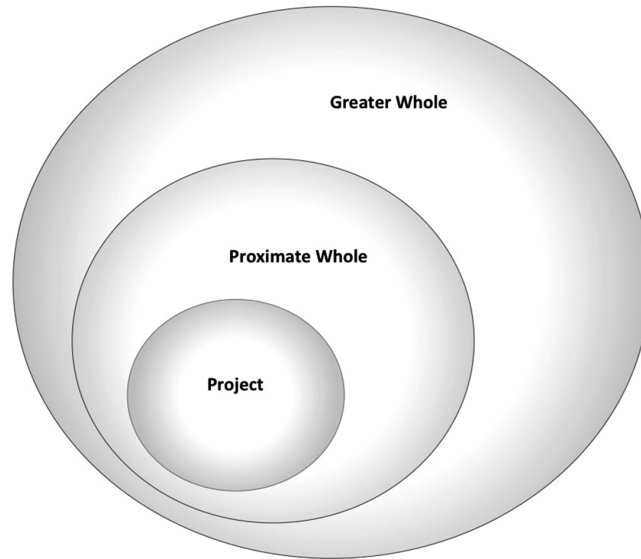


FIGURE 2.11 Every project is nested within its place (its proximate whole), which is nested within a greater whole.

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In the framework, the inner ring represents the project, which could be as limited as a single building or piece of infrastructure or as large as a regional planning effort.

The next ring is the *proximate whole*. This is a living system in close relationship to the project, one that is coherent and bounded by natural features of the landscape and/or cultural agreement. It is usually possible to see direct effects and exchanges between the project and its proximate whole or to imagine them occurring in the future. Some examples are the neighborhood in which a building is sited or the watershed within which a township is located.

The third ring, or *greater whole*, is the next higher level of system, within which the proximate whole plays a role. If the project is a building, and a neighborhood is the proximate whole, then the district or city is the greater whole.

Humans draw boundaries to define and give form to whatever they wish to work on. This makes it possible to navigate in a world where “everything is connected to everything.” However, it is important to hold in mind Buckminster

Fuller's reported admonition that "every boundary is a useful bit of fiction." Identifying boundaries to define a project's nested wholes is a process of discernment; a series of refinements that will change as understanding grows and deepens.

HOW DOES HERE WORK?

Part of the art and discipline of holistic thinking is the ability to scan disciplines and sources of information in order to bring them together in a way that generates meaning. This is sometimes referred to as pattern literacy. It is the ability to see the underlying patterns that link and make sense of disparate forms of information.

For example, looking at political or economic boundaries rarely reveals how a living system actually works. Looking at place from a pattern perspective yields a very different picture.

Patterns of Geophysical Organizing

Looking at how the physical landscape is structured often provides clues about the dynamic operations that are at work in a place. For example, the Rio Grande has been structuring the delta where McAllen, Texas, is located for thousands of years, and this has exerted a subtle but pervasive influence on the region. Even landscapes that have been radically altered by humans, such as densely populated urban centers, continue to be shaped by geophysical organizing.

Patterns of Biological Organizing

Biological systems (for example, a forest ecosystem) generally organize themselves to moderate or take advantage of underlying geophysical conditions (although, of course, this process can be disrupted by human interventions). Interactions among climate, soils, and hydrology shape local biological communities. To learn more about this aspect of a place, it can be useful to seek out an ecological history. This can provide a sense of the ways these communities have responded to changing conditions.

Patterns of Human Organizing

Place-sourced human culture arises in response to geophysical and biological organization. For example, whether a landscape is forested or open, coastal

or mountainous, will have a profound influence on how people provide for themselves, shelter themselves, and transact with each other and the world at large. At the same time, humans also contribute to making places what they are.

WHAT KIND OF HERE IS THIS?

Regenerative development gains much of its power from the ability of design practitioners to discern the essences of places by observing and engaging with the people who live in them. Here are three different approaches to this delicate work. They are a good way to begin, but they are by no means an exhaustive list.

How Do Local People Describe Place?

Though we may not be aware of it, we often talk and think about the places where we live in a nested way. If someone asks us where we live, we might answer with the name of the state or region. Pressed for more details, we would name our city or district or neighborhood or street. Depending on our shared level of local knowledge, we might offer landmarks (“across the river”) or even historical references (“next to where the grocery store used to be, before it burned down”). This layered approach is commonly used to contextualize all kinds of relationships.

Locational definitions are often reflected in the way newspapers or television broadcasts characterize their areas: serving “the tri-county area” or “the upper valley.” Local people know exactly what these phrases mean, along with a host of others that capture the larger and smaller contexts of place. One can begin to develop an understanding of a place and a sense of the boundaries between proximate and greater wholes by inviting local people to share how they think about where they live.

How Do Local People Express Place?

A highly informative way to gain insight about the character of place is to notice how people celebrate it. This can take the form of fairs or parades or community days. It can be reflected in the way people spruce up their streets, especially when the sprucing is done by neighborhood residents rather than government agencies or business boosters. These are indicators of what

people take pride in and how they express it. The task is to see through what is presented externally to the message behind it.

Clues to the essence of a place can be found in all kinds of interesting sources. Very often, even small communities will have a cookbook of local recipes. Along with local variations on regional cuisines and foodstuffs, these can offer glimpses into local lives and histories. Some communities are lucky enough to have published oral histories, which not only flesh out the understanding of past events and local mores, but also allow the reader to discern the inflection and the spirit of residents. Local literature and art can also be rich sources of insight. Novels, paintings, and music that successfully capture feelings and values of residents can provide windows into the lived experience of place that data simply doesn't offer.

What Do Local People Love about Their Place?

Almost all conversations with people about the places where they live ultimately lead back to the heart of the matter, which is why they live there in the first place. What is it that they love? What is it that they want other people to experience because it is so dear to them? When people get in touch with the genuine affection and caring they feel for their places, they enable others to contact the deeper, inner realities at work in them. Often these deeper sources of caring are diminished or even forgotten in the course of day-to-day living. Eliciting from people what they love about where they live not only reveals its essence; it regenerates their sense of connection to it.

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