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Chapter 6

Temporality and the Rhythms of Sustainable Landscapes

Edward Relph

Introduction

The argument in this essay has its origins in two comments by Anne Buttimer in *Sustainable Landscapes and Lifeways* (2001) with which, in a friendly way, I will take issue. The first comment is that 'issues of sustainable development … inevitably involve nature and its multiple rhythmicities' (Buttimer 2001, 7). While this is certainly so, I argue that a human response to these rhythms requires an underlying sense of time that can inform sustainable development in a consistent and coherent manner.

The second comment is the conclusion where Buttimer remarks that 'the knowledges which the twentieth century has produced in academic and applied settings are apparently not of the kind needed for guiding imagination beyond the current contradictions' (2001, 378). The contradictions to which she refers are those implicit in objective scientific observation, for this is necessarily filtered through cultural practices and is really not objective at all. I agree that a different kind of understanding is needed if we are to imagine ourselves out of the present situation, but I think the foundation for this can be found in phenomenological insights about existence and the experience of time, many of which were articulated in the twentieth century as a sort of counter-knowledge to prevailing scientific methods. Phenomenology understands time as it is experienced, with complex links between recollection, the present moment and anticipation. This understanding is known as 'temporality,' and it is temporality that underlies and must inform sustainability.

Sustainability (or sustainable development – in this essay I regard them as the same) is an enigmatic idea because it has been exploited as a description of short-term economic growth, even though this is based on drawing down the natural capital of the earth and hence is manifestly unsustainable. As I understand it, sustainability is above all a concept about time. It indicates a form of change, whether in ecosystems, economies or cities, that can endure indefinitely. Attitudes toward time, and the forms of change that follow from them, are expressed in cultural landscapes. Thus, reverence for the past is demonstrated in stylistic revivals and the preservation of old things; celebration of the future is evident in modernist designs that self-consciously embrace innovation. Sustainability requires a composed attitude toward time that balances past, present and future in the interests of continuity. Where time seems to be regarded as a commodity and landscapes are filled with unrelated fragments of heritage and futuristic gestures, sustainability remains distant. There is substantial

evidence that this is the current circumstance. Conversely, temporality is revealed in landscapes that display an easy coexistence of old and new, and here sustainable practices are either already present or are possible.

The Necessity of Sustainability

The historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his sweeping survey of the twentieth century (Hobsbawm, 1994, 558) concluded that it was ending in 'problems for which nobody has or even claimed to have solutions.' When he turned his attention to the future he saw environmental problems, the huge gap between the rich and the poor, and the evaporation of clear norms and common values that could serve as the basis for solutions (Hobsbawm, 2000, 162-167). A no less chastening view of the current state of things is expressed by the Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen. He writes:

> We live in a world of unprecedented opulence, of a kind that would have been hard to imagine a century or two ago … And yet we also live in a world with remarkable deprivation, destitution and oppression. There are many new problems as well as old ones, including persistence of poverty and unfulfilled elementary needs, occurrence of famines and widespread hunger, violation of elementary political freedoms as well as basic human liberties, extensive neglect of the interests and agency of women, and worsening threats to our environment and to the sustainability of our social and economic lives (Sen 1999, xi).

Sen's hope is that rethinking basic ideas, and treating development as a process of achieving freedom from poverty and injustice, might reduce or resolve many of these problems. This will, of course, require a huge change of perspective about the purpose of development; his argument is intended to begin the process of bringing about this change.

Although huge shifts of social perspective in short periods have occurred before, for instance, with the abolition of slavery, and more recently with women's liberation, there is a serious difficulty posed by the sorts of problems that Hobsbawm and Sen describe. It has been suggested that they are so complex, difficult to understand and to resolve, that solutions may exceed human ingenuity. One of my colleagues at the University of Toronto, Thomas Homer-Dixon (2000) calls this 'the ingenuity gap' and sees evidence of it, for example, in global climate change, which demands sophisticated and expensive research, multilateral international agreements, the co-operation of countless agencies, changes in individual and group behavior and a shift of political will and economic investment. His hopeful prognosis is that the ingenuity gap can be closed by working simultaneously from both its sides. From one side, improved research and education could lead to more ingenious solutions (but these are precisely what Anne Buttimer considers inappropriate and not up to the task). On the other side of the gap, we can try to slow down change, and look for simpler, more adaptable ways of doing things that will reduce the need for ingenuity. This is the way of sustainable development.

Temporality and the Townscape of Markham

Intentionally or unintentionally, the appearance of built places and landscapes reveals a great deal about what a culture considers important because it involves substantial investments of effort and money. A culture's attitude to time, no less than anything else, is expressed in the landscapes that it makes for itself.

In 1976 Hugh Sloan, a graduate student I was supervising, wrote a thesis about the manifestations of time in the townscape of Markham, a small town near Toronto, that has subsequently developed some unusual policies and practices with regard to heritage. Sloan adopted a distinctive perspective to time and townscape. All attempts to explain time are, he wrote, inadequate and inconclusive when compared with the intricacies of everyday 'temporality.' Temporality is the lived-experience of time that precedes any notion of quantitative clock time; it is the dense association of memory, present awareness and expectation that, among other things, integrates us into landscapes. Kevin Lynch describes it in *What Time is this Place?* (1972, 124-125) as 'an elastic flow within an intermittent present, moving now fast, now slowly, according to biological rhythms of which we are only half aware; and changeable future and past … in which there are peaks and valleys, rhythms, eras and boundary zones.' Landscapes and townscapes are simultaneously the contexts of temporal experiences and subject to temporality. They are the settings for diurnal, weekly and seasonal patterns of human activity, the backdrops and reference points for recollections and expectations. They are an essential component of the geography of memory. And in a manner broadly similar to that of human life, albeit at many different and overlapping tempos, landscapes have rhythms of creation, change and decay. A street is planned and surveyed, buildings along it are constructed, all of them new at once; the street endures, perhaps for centuries, but its buildings are modified differently, some are maintained with few alterations, others are deeply renovated or deteriorate and are completely replaced. Eventually the street and all its buildings, like the cities of the ancient Mayas, may be abandoned and disappear beneath the slow and relentless forces of natural decay.

Sloan drew an analogy between music and townscape. He noted that rhythm in music gives order and structure to a composition, with the individual moments of rhythm contributing to the total character of a piece of music even as they pervade harmony, tone, melody and intensity. Similarly, he suggested, the temporal quality of townscape pervades all aspects of townscape experience. The manifestations of time in activities, objects, and buildings contribute to an overall temporal pattern of decay and renovation, of newness and oldness. In a landscape that is well composed, the past, present and future are interwoven by this rhythm.

The town of Markham, which was then about 15 kilometers beyond the edge of the built up area of Toronto, provided Sloan with a typical North American case study for the investigation of temporality and townscape. Its streets were laid out in the early 1800s, but many of the buildings had been constructed in the late-nineteenth century and its general Victorian character remained. Some of the original buildings had been replaced by supermarkets and gas stations, and there were some new subdivisions on adjacent to the old areas.

Sloan carefully examined Markham's townscape for different expressions of attitudes to time. He considered ways in which the past was manifest through

restorations and preservation, he looked for landscapes that seemed to be lodged in the present, and he explored intimations of the future in such things as signs that announced plans for development. Markham's main street of shops he described as showing a time of 'coexistence.' In this he saw a 'coincidence of transience and permanence' in which objects and buildings from several generations were rhythmically integrated as though in a visual equivalent of a musical phrase that linked different melodies. These, he suggested, are the qualities of a temporal townscape. In contrast, where new subdivisions adjoined Victorian areas there was a 'time edge' – an abrupt juxtaposition – where it was possible, in effect, to step from the late-nineteenth century into the late-twentieth century. And Markham's pioneer museum, with a collection of old artifacts, barns and isolated buildings of doubtful significance, was, he thought, a 'significant time deception.' Both it and its elements were out of context and discordant.

Disrupted Temporality and Heritage

Since 1976, when Sloan completed his study, Markham has experienced intense urban development; and it has been enveloped by the conurbation of Toronto. Its municipal boundaries, which previously bore some relationship to the geographical entity that most people would have recognized as a town, have been expanded to include several hamlets and villages and a substantial surrounding agricultural zone. Between 1996 and 2001 the population of this new Town of Markham grew from 160,000 to 207,000, with most of the increase in pleasant subdivisions of single family, detached houses with vaguely Victorian or neo-Classical facades. Markham has also become a major center for high-technology in Canada, with one of the major North American hubs for IBM, and many other electronic and pharmaceutical facilities housed in buildings designed according to the best principles of utilitarian modernism. In reaction to this rapid development, Markham has developed some remarkable, innovative approaches to heritage and in 2000 it was the recipient of the first Prince of Wales prize for Stewardship of Built Heritage.

When Sloan wrote in 1976, the concept of 'heritage' was in its infancy and he scarcely mentioned it. Since then it has become an essential part of the discourse for things old and considered valuable. It is not an unproblematic idea. Its primary intent is to maintain connection with the past in the face of remorseless change, but in landscapes its chief manifestations seem to be time edges, discordances and disruptions of the rhythms of temporality. This is no less true for Markham than for anywhere else. Consider, for example, the following three local landscapes.

Heritage Estates

Current Canadian approaches to suburban development require the land surface to be scraped flat so that impediments to construction are minimized. Old buildings get in the way of this simple process. The most innovative approach to heritage in Markham, and the one that probably was instrumental in its winning the Prince of Wales prize, has involved the relocation of old houses to Heritage Estates, a subdivision of 'last resort' for buildings that would otherwise have been demolished.

In Markham it is possible to buy a 150-year-old house for a dollar, on condition that you uproot it, put it on the back of a truck, move it to Heritage Estates, renovate it and live in it for at least two years. The total cost of relocation is about the same as buying a new house.

Heritage Estates has 38 lots and in 2002, 30 of these were occupied by relocated houses with the rest waiting for customers. It is subject to strict site planning controls. The exteriors of the houses have to be restored to their original appearance, though they are mounted on new concrete foundations and the interiors have been deeply renovated. The only garages allowed are in old barns and sheds, also relocated. The houses are arranged mostly by the order in which they arrived and without regard to age or style. They have standardized setbacks and rather oddly face onto bulbous culs-de-sac that have to be about triple the normal road width to allow the house-carrying trucks room to maneuvre.

The intention behind Heritage Estates is commendable. It aims to maintain as much of the built past as possible in the face of rapid urban change. But it has the sanitary feel of a retirement home for old houses that once had separate existences on farms, and have now been uprooted and pushed into uneasy proximity. Heritage Estates is adjacent to the pioneer museum of old wooden barns and farm buildings that Sloan regarded as a time deception, and like that is the outcome of a sense of time in which fragments of history can be transported, rearranged, segregated, and otherwise turned into commodities.

Market Village/Pacific Mall/Heritage Town

Market Village and Pacific Mall are parts of a single shopping mall located a few miles from Heritage Estates. They have a complex, brief and intensely post-modern history. In the late 1980s a giant crafts and garden center was built on this site; it was housed in a massive barn constructed, in a sort of precursor to heritage preservation of last resort, out of lumber recycled from local barns that had been demolished. With old farm machines as ornaments, fresh baking and a petting zoo, the garden center exuded rural nostalgia. It was so financially successful that a contiguous development called Market Village was begun. This was a disneyfied blend of simulacra of the architecture of small town Ontario with a medieval townscape of winding, outdoor pedestrian streets. Market Village was a financial disaster, probably because it was completed in the early 1990s just as an economic depression began, but also because open-air shopping malls are not very sensible options for Canadian winters.

By 1990 Markham had become a popular destination for Chinese immigrants, especially from Hong Kong. Market Village was acquired by a Chinese developer who promptly enclosed the pedestrian streets by the expedient method of installing a flat metal roof without regard to the fake facades of buildings, parts of which face onto the now enclosed streets and parts of which stick up above.

In its new, enclosed, Chinese form, the stores were quickly rented and Market Village prospered so much that about 1997 another Chinese developer bought the adjacent crafts and garden center, demolished the barn and constructed Pacific Mall. This consists a two-storey industrial shed with the ground floor divided into a grid of glass-walled, retail cubicles about five meters square, with the ductwork and structural components all exposed. Upstairs, however, there is a very different style of retail

area, identified as 'the largest Heritage Town in America.' It is entered through an elegant gateway of ceramic sculptures of dragons and lions, with ridge end details that are replicas of those in the Forbidden City in Beijing. Inside there are narrow walkways lined with booths decorated with lanterns and intricate signs and selling the same food and goods that are available in the cubicles downstairs.

The Future is the Past at Cornell

About two miles east of Heritage Estates is Cornell, one of the largest new-urbanist projects under development in North America. When completed it will have a population of about 30,000. Planned by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, the pre-eminent new-urbanist planners of North America, it has reduced-width streets, garages situated along rear laneways, porches on the fronts of the houses and architectural details that are loosely derived from the Victorian parts of Toronto. Behind these old-style facades, every house is fully networked with a dedicated Internet connection on each floor. The aim in Cornell is to create a new type of development that reproduces the pedestrian and community-oriented qualities of old towns, while accommodating the latest technologies. A photograph in the promotional sales materials shows the developer Larry Law shaking hands with Andres Duany (Figure 6.1). The caption in large letters across the top of the photograph reads 'I have seen the future and it is the past.'

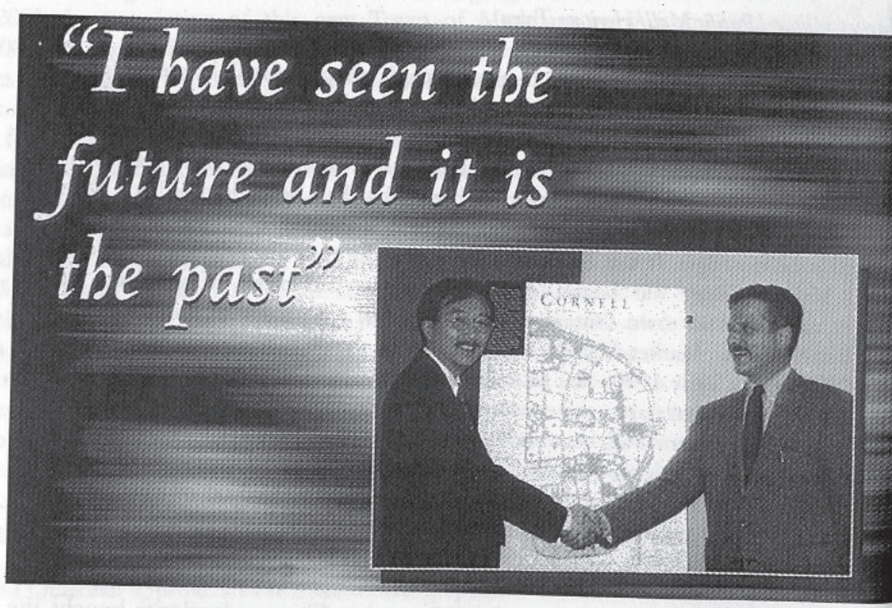

Figure 6.1 The future becomes the past. New urbanist Andres Duany shaking hands with developer Larry Law in publicity material for the new urbanist project at Cornell in the suburbs of Toronto
Source: Publicity material for the Cornell project.

These three examples from Markham reveal deep confusions in contemporary attitudes to time. Heritage Estates treats old buildings as movable commodities, Market Village and Heritage Town reduce history to an instantly replaceable, exportable set of decorations, and Cornell blends past and future into an eerie timelessness. There is nothing exceptional about these temporal confusions. When I visited the Acropolis there was a crane inside the Parthenon and its columns were being sprayed with chemicals to protect them from weathering. In Glasgow, Vancouver, San Antonio, and Sydney I have seen old facades propped up with steel beams, waiting for new back-buildings. On a wall of the exhaust-stained, concrete perimeter of the Barbican project in London is a plaque that declares 'The probable site where on May 24 1734 John Wesley "Felt his heart strangely warmed." This experience of grace was the beginning of Methodism.' The sign is surrounded by towering apartments, dead spaces, roads, and traffic. Lever House on Park Avenue in New York, completed in 1952, is an icon of modernist and futurist design; it married the angular, undecorated, aesthetic of glass and steel with forward-looking corporate, capitalist notions of progress. In 2001 it was extensively restored. I have seen the future and it is the past.

Figure 6.2 The closure of temporality: a farm on the edge of Toronto
Source: Author.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century there has been a proliferation of time edges and time deceptions. Heritage projects preserve fragments of the past with little regard for historical or geographical context, and the future seems to have become increasingly difficult to imagine without a veneer of something old. I suppose that in some limited sense there is a time of coexistence in the landscape of Heritage Estates,

with its old-new houses and the empty lots waiting for more; there is also a sort of time of coexistence in the complex, superimposed structures of Pacific Mall and in the future-past visions of Cornell. But it is difficult to see in any of them temporal rhythms that possess harmony, tone and melody. On the contrary, and for all their good intentions, what they suggest is mostly staccato, irregular and discordant.

In the Fall of 1992, Sterba Farm Market, a small pick-your-own farm in Markham operating on land that already had been approved for residential development, closed down for its penultimate season. The owner put up a hand-made sign for his customers that captured many of the current problems with landscapes of time and heritage (Figure 6.2). It said simply: 'Closed Temporality.' The sign, the building and the farm have long since disappeared.

The Paradox of the Closure of Temporality

In his book *Landscape of Events* Paul Virilio (2000, xi) claims enigmatically that 'history has crashed into the wall of time.' By this I think he means that somehow the past has got in the way of the future, perhaps because of failed promises of progress and the gradual evaporation of hopeful expectations, perhaps because of the surge of enthusiasm for preservation of the past. Cultural landscapes that are being made at the present time are filled with time edges, deceptions, eradications, restorations, and renewals. They demonstrate an intense and simultaneous concern for heritage and a blithe disregard for temporality. This is an inherently unstable situation and a particular manifestation of a contradiction that lies deep within modernity. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1965, 276-77) wrote that 'in order to take part in modern civilization it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past … There is the paradox: how to become modern and return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization.' If it is to be more than a token gesture, sustainable development has to resolve this paradox.

Temporality and Sustainability

'Progress' and 'heritage' may point in different directions, but they both externalize the experience of time in ways that are strained. William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1961, 380) wrote that 'Knowledge about life is one thing; effective occupation of a place in life, with its dynamic currents passing through your being, is another.' Of these currents, time is perhaps the most important. From the perspective of detached knowledge about life, to which James referred, time might be understood as a river on which we are floating; its flow constitutes progress, with heritage and history upstream and the future downstream. But from the phenomenological perspective of the effective occupation of a place in life, time lies within us and infuses everything we feel and do. Care, concern, anxiety, guilt, recollection, anticipation, responsibility, hope, planning, building, and all the other experiences that

constitute our lives, are saturated with time (Barrett, 1962, 227-228). This dynamic, lived experience of time is what I understand by 'temporality.'

The phenomenon of temporality has been thoroughly explicated by Martin Heidegger (1962) in his phenomenological study of *Being and Time*. In this treatise he discloses temporality as a central phenomenon of human existence. Although we necessarily spend much of our everyday lives engaged in 'idle chatter' or uncritical 'curiosity' about what we see and perceive, Heidegger argues that there are moments when we become reflexively aware of the deep responsibilities that are implicit in the very fact of our existence, including responsibilities to others and to things simply because they also exist. These can be understood as moments of 'authentic care' and Heidegger proposed that 'Temporality reveals itself as the meaning of authentic care' (1962, 374). Temporality is always present both in the experience of those responsibilities we have acquired because of what has happened in our lives, and in our obligations toward the future. In temporality there is responsibility, in responsibility there is continuity, and continuity is the key to sustainability.

In a later work, *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger (1977) pursued these notions of responsibility from a different angle. In this essay he interprets the essence of technology as a way of revealing truth, in which truth is to be understood not as a confirmed fact but as clarity or insight. *Techne* in its classical Greek meaning referred as much to art and poetry (*poiesis*) as to engineering (1977, 13), because both building and art were then understood as ways of revealing truth. *Techne* embraced any activity that brought clarity to the meaning of existence and the responsibilities that were associated with it. Modern technology, however, has the character of challenging and confronting whatever it works with. Instead of bringing truth and clarity, it treats nature as a 'standing reserve' to be set aside and unlocked for human use whenever required. At the core of modern technology seems to be the expectation that nature reports itself to human beings in some way or other that is identifiable through processes of calculation and accounting (1977, 23). 'In this way the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his own construct' (1977, 27). This, Heidegger suggested, brings us 'to the brink of a precipitous fall,' the point where we ourselves will be taken as standing-reserve.

Heritage preservation is commendable as a strategy of last resort and a rearguard action against the destruction of the past. On the other hand, it takes history as a standing reserve, to be set aside and fenced off as an attraction, or as a commodity to be acquired and moved around.

This is the attitude that lies behind what Hobsbawm described as problems 'for which nobody has or even claims to have solutions,' the problems of global climate change, the depletion of renewable resources and failures to distribute the benefits of progress in a just and equitable way. This is also the attitude manifest in landscapes that display a self-conscious, confused and fractured sense of time. For all their good intentions, Heritage Estates, Heritage Town, Cornell and countless other preservation and development sites demonstrate the use of heritage as a standing-reserve of history, a commodity to be exploited and moved around at will. In other words these problems of heritage and of environments have to be regarded not just as separate technical matters, but as different expressions of an underlying and shared ontology that is rapidly ceasing to be appropriate.

Sustainability and temporality, when regarded as solutions to these problems, also have their technical aspects. There are ecologically and geographically sound practices of environmental management that have to be designed, implemented and maintained; similarly there are strategies for achieving townscapes that display a coexistence of times. Within these there may well be some sort of time edges, but these will have form and character that are equivalent to the breaks between movements in a symphony. They will reveal lines of change that are nevertheless part of a whole. These various practices are necessary but insufficient. True sustainability requires a change in outlook that grasps technology as 'safekeeping and coming to presence of truth' (Heidegger 1977, 33). Although what I have written here is mostly in the context of urban sustainability, safekeeping is no less important as an underlying principle for ecological and social sustainability. From the perspective of safekeeping we find ourselves aware that we dwell in the world and have responsibility for sustaining its well-being. This is not a responsibility that humanity has chosen; nor is it a responsibility that can be evaded. It simply is.

Conclusion

'Remember' wrote Alfred Lord Tennyson in his poem *Locksley Hall Revisited*, 'how the course of time will swerve, /Crook and turn upon itself in many a backward streaming curve.' He had first visited Locksley Hall sixty years earlier and in the enthusiasm of youth coined one of the great anthems of progress: 'Forward, forward let us range/Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change.' When he revisited sixty years later, after six decades of industrial and urban progress, he dramatically reversed his advice: 'Let us hush this cry of "Forward" till ten thousand years have gone.' Much of what made Tennyson alter his view of progress was that it had done so little to resolve the poverty and injustice that it had largely caused. The fact that a century later both Eric Hobsbawm and Amartya Sen could still point to issues of deep poverty and inequality, and then add to these a litany of environmental concerns, suggests that progress is more successful at creating problems than at solving them.

Sustainable development offers a possible way out of this paradox. I have argued from the context of urban landscapes that sustainability, if it is to be more than a thin gesture towards the resolution of urban, ecological, and social problems, requires a radical departure from modern habits of thought associated with economic growth and technological challenges to nature. It has to be rooted in composure toward time, technology and nature. Sustainability stands little chance of success as long as our culture is adrift in temporal confusion, so it somehow has to grasp the temporality that links past, present and future and translate this into practice. This will require the unfamiliar and difficult ways of thinking associated with phenomenology, though it can draw on precedents in poetry and philosophy, and in the accomplishments of those who have looked with care at the world around them and have had the freedom to act on their insights. There is no programmatic way either to learn it or to teach this way of thinking and seeing, and it seems that even when learned it has a tendency to slip away. There is, however, probably no better place to begin than by becoming attuned to the resonance, temporal rhythms, and modulations of life and landscape.

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