“Experiential Design as a Way to Reconnect Urban Communities and Environmental Systems”
Gwen Wolfgang

In recent years, authors and educators have identified a growing gap between urban culture and the natural processes that sustain it. The internet and other technologies provide instantaneous access to once-elusive environmental processes, eliminating the need for natural exploration. Changes in light, climate, and the subtle nuances of water can now be discovered with a few clicks of a computer mouse or taps on a smartphone. Recognizing that society has grown increasingly disconnected from the natural systems that sustain and surround its urban environments, landscape architects can illuminate these relationships and create communities that better connect with environmental processes.

Since the industrial revolution, cities have been developing more rapidly, and in some cases, have resulted in positioning themselves further away from the environmental systems that are fundamental to their survival. The recent phenomena of megacities and metaregions make these urban settings increasingly critical places in which to engage environmental processes. Within this context, community design and development plays a powerful role in shaping and providing experiences with these processes.

Many have written about technology as the root of disconnection with natural processes. In Marshall Berman’s *All that is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (1982), modernization is blamed for society advancing to so that it is no longer aligned with the environmental processes that first shaped it. Through *Landscape as a System, City as a Landscape*, author Kristina Hill traces this disconnection to technological changes that occurred over several decades: “the paradigm changes involved are becoming more evident by the day” and “underlie the major intellectual and aesthetic shifts” of the era (26). Philosopher E.O. Wilson, whose book *Biophilia* discusses the innate human need for connection with nature, and journalist Richard Louv, who explores the benefits of connections with nature, reinforce the need for designers to address this gap.

Rather than combating environmental processes in urban sites, as is often the case with contemporary development, these systems can be viewed as infrastructure. Because it often takes a beating when a site is engineered, natural water systems are among the environmental processes from which society is most disconnected. Designers will need to look beyond landscape urbanism, and even eco-urbanism, to design rich, provocative experiences with environmental processes in order to highlight and reinforce connections with natural processes.

Allegheny Riverfront Park in Pittsburgh is one such landscape. Designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates in the late 1990s, Allegheny Riverfront Park is situated on narrow riverfront property and is planted with species that are able to regenerate after flooding, showcasing their connection with and dependence upon environmental processes. Over the course of a season, visitors might see plants grow, bloom, and thrive before being uprooted by flood, becoming flood debris, and regenerating. Van Valkenburgh ensures that this risk remains at the forefront of park users’ minds by

![Figure 1: Floodplain at Allegheny Riverfront Park ("Allegheny Riverfront Park")](image-url)
placing visual reminders of flooding in their path (e.g. sidewalks were cast with impressions of flood debris). In addition to visual changes, the use of the park changes during a flood because the floodplain is inaccessible (Figure 1). “The design of the park seeks...to create an experientially rich pathway from an urban upper level park over a major regional highway down to a lower level park at the river’s edge. The lower level is deliberately wild in its native plantings, which can regenerate themselves after floods or ice flows” (“Allegheny Riverfront Park”). This project showcases the inclusion of engaging experiences as successful tools in environmentally connective design.

Potential sites for application of these renective design strategies include sites on which water plays a key role. Modern development has largely obscured these systems; sites that once played host to natural water systems, now characterized by pipes and drains, are ripe for redevelopment. One such landscape is Town Spring in downtown Athens, Georgia. The city began here because of the adjacency to a water source; today’s designers have the luxury of abandoning such restrictive planning because of advancements in the field of engineering. What was originally an important water source for the town has since been converted to surface parking lots for the University of Georgia. Recently daylighted, a small patch that reveals the spring is still overshadowed by asphalt and often goes unnoticed (Figure 2).

Redeveloping this space by creating renective amenities for Athenians and the university community can once again celebrate the connection between urban culture and natural processes. Sites of similar composition, where the efficiency of contemporary urban design has limited connections with natural systems, can benefit from this experiential urbanism as designers create places that offer stimulating experiences, allowing for a deeper connection with and appreciation for the natural environment.


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