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A path to the future

As names go, the 'Ohio and Erie Canalway Towpath Trail Extension' does not have the ring of a really exciting exercise, but this is exactly what it is. It actually has the ability to take the existing towpath cum bike-track, and turn it into an agent of change that will give a 'transitional' area of Cleveland new purpose and vitality.

In the not too distant future, travelling the towpath, as it weaves its way through the historical industrial heartland of Cleveland, will become a journey of discovery of past memories and future possibilities. The provision of such experience has been central to the conception of a proposal for the Steelyard Commons trail segment by two Chicago artists, Frances Whitehead and Lisa Norton. As we shall see, their creative input has been considerable.

Framings

When conservationists set out to restore natural environments, they do not start where things are worst. They do the reverse, beginning from where things are best, extending forward and outward, making good use of pioneer species of plants and trees. By such means, even the most devastated areas eventually become revegetated and biodiverse. Framed by this kind of thinking, the towpath project needs to be understood as a spine that extends viable urban space into a predominantly industrial zone. Thereafter, on and around this spine, sustainable natural, social and economic environments can be grown.

Such projects should not be viewed as just locally significant. They are examples of the kind of redirective leadership that is needed globally; they demonstrate ways to develop and secure the environments and ecologies of our dependence. If humanity is to overcome its current 'condition of defuturing unsustainability,' ways of communicating positive forms of change are essential.

It's worth remembering that for the first time in human history cities now support over half the world's population. The dynamic towards rapid urbanization, and associated urban sprawl, continues unabated. Counter to the fundamental interests and needs of city dwellers, this 'development' process takes a great deal of good agricultural land out of productive use. As the world's population continues to grow and urbanize, the land available to grow the food needed to physically sustain humanity diminishes. Additionally, the impacts of global warming are making this already critical situation worse.

The towpath project not only has the potential to transform an industrial valley into a space of responsible and sustainable urban development but, and more immediately, it could provide an amenity able to improve the quality of life for the population of Cleveland and its visitors.

Content

Acting as redirective practitioners (a name given to any creative professional who bring their skills and creativity to solve problems of unsustainability) artists Frances Whitehead and Lisa Norton have made a major conceptual input into one of the key elements of the project – the 'Steelyard Commons Segment'. They saw and facilitated connections between organizations in Cleveland with an environmental investment in the success of the project, and in so doing created a new local network; they recognised the potential of slag, a waste material from iron and steel-making, as a usable construction material in rehabilitating the towpath. Slag, turned into cement and concrete, is a good pavement material that is zero CO2 emissions rated, as the emissions are credited to the iron or steel – this means that making "slag cement" has less environmental impact than manufacturing regular "portland cement." Likewise they explored remedial landscape design, using slag together with river sediment and dung (from the local zoo) to create engineered soil as a growing medium in which to test plants and trees that will flourish on the site. So rather than seeing slag as the unsightly evidence of a history of steel-making, they viewed it as a resource able to be transformed into an attractive construction material.

Besides expanding perceptions of the nature of, and relations between, recycling, waste and resources, Whitehead and Norton also explored the potential of a new retail

development; innovation and information hub; a super-graphics venue; public art and heritage content - all as elements of the segment to be encountered en route.

Problems and Potentialities

Clearly such projects have enormous potential if properly supported. They can be made socially participatory, instructive, celebratory and above all, provide pathways towards viable futures.

It is sobering to recall that twelve thousand years ago nomadic people converged on the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East because food had become scarce. In the West it had become very cold and in the East severe drought raged – there was insufficient food to hunt and gather. As a result of these climate changes, people migrated to where food was plentiful and stayed there – human settlement thus commenced. At the same time, people started to cultivate wild einkorn (an early form of wheat). This activity can be taken to mark the birth of agriculture and thereafter the conditions from which surplus (and thus trade) was created. These are the foundational circumstances out of which the material world of human creation with which we are familiar, emerged.

The ever increasing impacts of human actions, especially the combustion of fossil fuels, has again brought humanity to a moment when its survival depends on how it adapts to a changing climate. Things have turned full circle: we are now on the edge of a new epoch of our existence. The challenges to be faced could be as dramatic as they were all those millennia ago!

In such a setting, there is much to confront with courage, a great deal to conserve, a vast amount to learn. The demand for creativity is like never before. While we need sustainable technologies, we also need each other (community is part of our condition of dependence), plus creative cultures able to guide our values, perceptions, acquisition of knowledge and actions. Such needs, such imperatives, require experiential forms that can inspire and enable people rather than frighten or demotivate them. The Towpath Trail Extension has the potential to provide such a form. One can only hope that it is realized in such a way to fulfil such an ambition.