

THE NATURAL CITY:
RE-ENVISIONING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Edited by Ingrid Lemán Stefanovic and Stephen Bede Scharper

Today more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas. Meanwhile there is growing recognition that the environmental crisis, as in the case of global climate change and declining biodiversity, does not relate simply to 'natural' wilderness areas, but arises from, and affects, urban areas in a significant way. Yet, despite recent shifts in thinking, the perception persists that environmental issues are principally concerned with plants, animals, and pristine wilderness areas, while human settlements are the exclusive domain of architects, planners, and urbanists. Both at the conceptual and pragmatic levels, the implicit division of urban and natural environments serves to perpetuate myths of two separate entities, with nature seen as benevolent and the city as evil.

The Natural City is an interdisciplinary collection of essays that merges architectural theory and urban design with philosophy, religion, humanism, and environmental policy to present an alternative vision of urban life. The contributors argue that the deeply rooted urban/nature philosophical divide must be healed as a condition of building life-enhancing communities. Today new technologies promise to provide renewable energy sources and 'greener' designs. But it is fundamental values, attitudes, and perceptions that drive policy decisions. The aim of this volume is to redefine the meaning of cities as urban ecosystems and to encourage a more thoughtful philosophical and spiritual questioning of what it means to genuinely dwell in the cosmos that sustains us.

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Ingrid Leman Stefanovic and
Stephen Bede Scharper

The Natural City

Re-Envisioning the Built Environment

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: Cultivating the Terrain 3

INGRID LEMAN STEFANOVIC AND STEPHEN BEDE SCHARPER

I: Adjusting Our Vision: Some Philosophical Reflections 9

1 In Search of the Natural City 11

INGRID LEMAN STEFANOVIC

2 Can Cities Be Both Natural and Successful? Reflections Grounding
Two Apparently Oxymoronic Aspirations 36

W.S.K. CAMERON

3 The 'Gruing' of Cities 50

FRANK CUNNINGHAM

4 'My Streets Are My Ideas of Imagination': Literature and the
Theme of the Natural City 65

PETER TIMMERMAN

II: From the Stars to the Street: Cosmological Perspectives 87

5 From Community to Communion: The Natural City in Biotic and
Cosmological Perspective 89

STEPHEN BEDE SCHARPER

6 Sailing to Byzantium: Nature and City in the Greek East 104
BRUCE V. FOLTZ

7 Dao in the City 117
VINCENT SHEN

8 Biocracy in the City: A Contemporary Buddhist Practice 136
KENNETH MALY

III: Expanding Our Collective Horizons: Societal Implications 147

9 Gated Ecologies and ‘Possible Urban Worlds’: From the Global
City to the Natural City 149
HILARY CUNNINGHAM

10 Other Voices: Acoustic Ecology and Urban Soundscapes 161
RICHARD ODDIE

11 Ecofeminist ‘Cityzenry’ 174
TRISH GLAZEBROOK

12 Sustainable Urbanization 191
JOHN B. COBB, JR

13 ‘Troubled Nature’: Some Reflections on the Changing Nature of the
Millennial City, Gurgaon, India 203
SHUBHRA GURURANI

IV: Building on the Vision: Reflecting on Praxis 221

14 Urban Place as an Expression of the Ancestors 223
WILLIAM WOODWORTH RAWENO:KWAS

15 Seeing and Animating the City: A Phenomenological Ecology of
Natural and Built Worlds 231
DAVID SEAMON

16 The City: A Legacy of Organism-Environment Interaction at Every
Scale 257
ROBERT MUGERAUER

17 Natural Cities, Unnatural Energy? 295

GAURAV KUMAR AND BRYAN W. KARNEY

18 Children and Nature in the City 322

SARAH J. KING AND INGRID LEMAN STEFANOVIC

Conclusion 343

INGRID LEMAN STEFANOVIC AND STEPHEN BEDE SCHARPER

Contributors 347

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THE NATURAL CITY:
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Introduction: Cultivating the Terrain

The past half century, demographically speaking, might well be termed 'the age of urbanization.' In 1950, only 30 per cent of the population lived in urban areas; today, over half do, and, by 2030, according to projections by the United Nations, 60 per cent of the world's population will dwell in cities.¹

While many are there by choice, countless people live in cities in order to find work, even if it is sporadic, poorly paid, or unhealthy. The shift to urban living comes at great social and ecological cost. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which presents the conclusions of thousands of top scientists, suggests that human activities, including rapid urbanization, are dramatically affecting the health of the planet and the survival of contemporary society as we know it.²

Philosophers and humanists share these concerns. Religious leaders met in 2008 in Sweden at an Interfaith Summit on Climate Change to sign a manifesto urging extensive reductions of carbon dioxide emissions in all parts of the world, particularly within developed nations. Christians, Buddhists, Daoists, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, and Aborigines reached consensus: 'We all share the responsibility of being conscious caretakers of our home, planet Earth. We have reflected on the concerns of scientists and political leaders regarding the alarming climate crisis. We share their concerns.'³

Amid environmental destruction, global climate change, air and water pollution, and dangers to human and ecological health, is there hope? Can cities become centres of life-enhancing community rather than sources of environmental degradation? In the words of these faith leaders, 'Can planet Earth be healed? We are convinced that the answer is yes.'⁴

It is in a similar spirit of positive possibilities for change that the current volume is presented within a new vision of what we call ‘the natural city.’ Certainly, there is growing recognition of the fact that the environmental crisis does not relate simply to ‘natural’ wilderness environments, but arises from, and affects, urban areas in a significant way. The natural city points to the need to move beyond any conceptual bifurcation or artificial compartmentalization and instead acknowledge the need to integrate urban and ecological concerns in a sustainable manner.

As human beings, we dwell; it is ‘natural,’ therefore, that we build. It is, in fact, in our human settlements that historical records have generally emerged. Encapsulated in cities are many of our testimonials to *civitas*, to culture, to science, to philosophy. While our dwelling places, particularly in the modern era, damage nature, they also record humanity’s aspirations, needs, and failings, and perforce become a central locus for responding to our present and future environmental challenges.

This book describes the natural city – ‘natural’ not only because it is embedded in the ecological systems within which we work, but also because it embodies humanity’s essential spiritual and cosmological quests. The natural cities we strive to build certainly pose technical questions of auto-use restrictions and renewable energy sources, but they also raise larger cosmological questions: Who am I? What is my purpose here? And what is my relationship to the rest of the created universe? As we hope that this book demonstrates, the natural city is at its core not only a technological and architectural concern, but also an ontological, cosmological, and spiritual project.

The natural city similarly evokes the notion of social justice. Such a perspective takes seriously the social, political, economic, cultural, and moral dimensions of human–earth relationships, pointing to a dynamic, rather than a dichotomy, in the intersection of human and ecological communities. A human ecology reminds us that an abstract, metaphysical notion of interrelatedness is insufficient; as human agents, we are called not only to be aware of our interconnectedness with non-human nature and each other, but also to advance this interconnection according to the demands of social and economic justice. In this sense, recognizing the spiritual, ontological, and cosmological dimensions of the natural city is also, inherently, a political enterprise.

The natural city must be one that respects and heeds historical, sociological, cultural, economic, environmental, political, and ontological

origins. It opens up the possibility of dwelling among people and built spaces that are understood as more than mere objects. A narrow vision of instrumental rationality sees planning as no more than the technical ordering of residential, commercial, and industrial complexes, together with appropriate infrastructure. On the other hand, the natural city calls for another kind of thinking and planning, an ‘originative thinking,’ whereby buildings become other than discrete monuments to human ingenuity.⁵ Instead, they seek to commemorate meaningful spatial and temporal contexts – indeed, cosmological contexts. These natural dwelling places restore to us a sense of human dignity and sacred belonging to the earth and to the cosmos. They remind us of the grace of creation and invite us to look up at the stars and reflect upon our place in the universe. And in so doing, they bestow upon us a sense of belonging – to the natural world as well as to our dwelling places.

There is much more to be said about the meaning of the natural city: hence, this volume. We each can sense already that many of our urban ecosystems are not sustainable, nor are they humane dwelling places. The sparrows’ songs are drowned out by the din of car engines. Architecture becomes functional, seen purely from a narrow utilitarian point of view. While it may be aesthetically pleasing to some, we often feel emotionally alienated from these spaces; we feel that we do not belong. Grinding poverty stalks a disturbingly high percentage of the world’s urban residents. We sense that there is, in fact, something ‘unnatural’ about city living in such circumstances.

Where do we search for an alternative vision? Wherein does the richness of the living, natural city reside? Many of the essays in this volume address this question – if not to answer it conclusively, then at least to enlarge our dialogue and understanding.

Philosopher Joseph Grange suggests that ‘the city deserves a cosmology benefiting its grandeur, a semiotics worthy of its values and a praxis effective for all its citizens.’⁶ The natural city certainly deserves no less. Ideally, the essays in this book will constitute some first steps in moving us in this important direction.

The Structure of This Book

The structure of this book is explicitly interdisciplinary, merging architectural theory and urban design with philosophy, religion, humanism, and environmental policy. The volume is divided into four parts that emphasize somewhat unique directions within this interdisciplinary

conversation. Part I, 'Adjusting Our Vision: Some Philosophical Reflections,' sets the ontological grounding for the book.

In chapter 1, philosophy professor Ingrid Leman Stefanovic replies to some of the philosophical objections to the term 'natural' and advances the case for a phenomenological rethinking of the traditional metaphysical urban–natural divide. In chapter 2, phenomenologist W.S.K. Cameron considers whether we are describing an oxymoron when we portray cities as both natural and successful. Political philosopher Frank Cunningham moves in chapter 3 to describe cities as 'grue'-like – diverse and complex, defying universalizing definitions. He suggests that environmentalism calls for a holistic ecosystem perspective in the development of public policy, and discusses the challenges of defining a natural city against the background of diverse philosophical paradigms. Environmental studies professor Peter Timmerman then shows us in chapter 4 how the Western literary tradition has helped both to entrench, as well as to mirror, a long-standing separation of built environments from the natural world. Timmerman points to future directions of thought that might help to heal the divide.

Part II moves away from strictly philosophical concerns to consider how we might move 'From the Stars to the Street: Cosmological Perspectives.'⁷ Chapter 5, written by co-editor Stephen Bede Scharper, a professor of religion and ecology, reflects on the meaning of ecological integrity, garnering insights from Aldo Leopold's land ethic as well as Thomas Berry's concept of a universal communion of subjects. In chapter 6, phenomenologist and philosopher of Orthodox religion Bruce V. Foltz looks to clues for building a natural city through lessons learned from the holy city of Constantinople. In chapters 7 and 8, philosophy professors Vincent Shen and Kenneth Maly consider how Daoism and Buddhism respectively might help to shed light on the challenges of sustainability in a world increasingly defined by a Western technological world view.

Part III recognizes the need to look for ways of embedding these philosophical and cosmological concerns in social and institutional structures by 'Expanding Our Collective Horizons: Societal Implications.' Anthropology professor Hilary Cunningham's thought-provoking chapter shows how contemporary interpretations of the 'global city' miss out on essential elements that are more appropriately captured within the notion of a 'natural city.' In chapter 10, musician and phenomenologist Richard Oddie introduces an essential moment in the interpretation of a natural city by focusing on what is often most taken

for granted – the impact of soundscapes on the meaning of our urban environments. Phenomenologist Trish Glazebrook brings an important ecofeminist contribution to the table in chapter 11, while, in chapter 12, internationally renowned process theologian and ethicist John B. Cobb, Jr, describes his vision of self-sufficient urban and rural areas, offering China as a case in point. Anthropologist Shubhra Gururani closes part III with a discussion of how Gurgaon, a growing city in India, provides important clues to the challenges of configuring urban nature against the background of new knowledge and power discourses that emerge around the practice of capitalist production and consumption.

In the book's final section, part IV: 'Building on the Vision: Reflecting on Praxis,' we recognize that it will be the cities that we actually build on the ground that truly bear witness to our dialogue about natural cities. In chapter 14, Aboriginal architect William Woodworth *Raweno:kwas* describes how Toronto itself implicitly reflects long-standing Aboriginal land traditions within its built form. Geographer David Seamon suggests, in chapter 15, ways in which one can seek to build 'lively urban spaces,' drawing from the work of architectural space theorist Bill Hillier and listening to lessons of colour that arise from Goethean phenomenology. Robert Mugerauer, a philosopher and professor of architecture, takes new lessons, in chapter 16, for urban design from the continuity in organism–environment interactions found within the natural world.

In chapter 17, environmental engineers Gaurav Kumar and Bryan W. Karney explore the vital issue of energy use, recognizing the importance of embodied knowledge of consumption and production costs as a necessary condition of behaviour change. The final chapter, by Sarah J. King and Ingrid Leman Stefanovic, reflects on a research project that investigates children's perceptions of nature in the city. We cannot forget that the actions that we undertake today will influence the world of tomorrow. Our decisions are not simply our own, for our young will inherit our mistakes as well as our successes.

Each section of this book contains important insights and expands further on the philosophical, cosmological, socio-political, and practical demands of constructing natural cities. We are keenly aware, however, that the chapters of this book constitute only some first steps towards building a natural city – one that appreciates the givenness of a world that we did not create but for which, in many respects, we are responsible. The authors and editors invite our readers to give careful consideration to the ideas raised here, and then to continue to find new ways of

building more respectfully. Each one of us has a part to play in moving the environmental agenda forward in fertile, life-enhancing ways. Let us ensure that we continue the dialogue in a meaningful and constructive way, with an eye to leaving the planet in a healthier state than it was in when we arrived on it.

NOTES

- 1 *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2001 Revision*, prepared by the United Nations Population Division: <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup2001/wup2001dh.pdf> (accessed 20 January 2010).
- 2 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report*. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, with R.K. Pachauri and A. Riesinger, eds.], IPCC: Geneva, 2008, <http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-syr.htm> (accessed 3 December 2008).
- 3 See the complete report of the meetings in Uppsala, Sweden, 30 November 2008, at the Environment News Service: <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/nov2008/2008-11-30-01.asp> (accessed 3 December 2008).
- 4 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2007*.
- 5 For a discussion of the meaning of originative thinking, see Ingrid Leman Stefanovic, *Safeguarding Our Common Future: Rethinking Sustainable Development* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).
- 6 Joseph Grange, *The City: An Urban Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 209.
- 7 The editors are indebted to James Conlon's work *From the Stars to the Street: Engaged Wisdom for a Brokenhearted World* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2007), for this section heading.

PART ONE

Adjusting Our Vision: Some Philosophical Reflections

Not that we can have no recourse to philosophy, to its concepts or conceptions. But it cannot be our point of departure.

– Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

In the quote above, Lefebvre is critical of a philosophical tradition that aims at ‘abstract (metaphysical) representations of space,’ independent of a description of embodied, lived places.¹ He has a point. If philosophical reflection upon the meaning of a natural city remains simply at the level of theoretical abstraction, it is no more than a description of utopia – ‘no place.’

And yet, contrary to Lefebvre’s stand, it is precisely within philosophy that this book takes its point of departure. Is such a beginning at all problematic?

Philosophy is admittedly understood here as something other than rationalistic, abstract speculation. Rather than formulating theoretical constructs, the aim is to uncover foundational, taken-for-granted paradigms and world views that ground our ways of understanding the world.

Our interpretive horizons frame the way in which we see and understand our built and natural environments. Often, these *Weltanschauungen*, embedded in the historical traditions that we appropriate unthinkingly, are hidden, and yet they are fundamental to everything we do on a daily basis, including the way we envision cities and our place within them.

The chapters that introduce this volume are philosophical in the sense that they seek to bring to light some of the implicit world views that frame our policy making and planning initiatives. In chapter 1, Ingrid

Leman Stefanovic addresses what she sees to be a deeply rooted schism between 'nature' on the one hand and 'cities' or urban dwellings on the other. After showing how this dualism finds expression both empirically and conceptually in the modern world, she points the way towards a more integrative framework to ground the discussion of a 'natural city.'

W.S.K. Cameron continues to address this schism by acknowledging that contemporary human settlements exert huge ecological pressures upon the earth and that, in this sense, 'cities' and 'nature' may be seen to constitute an 'oxymoron.' He suggests that there may be a possibility of identifying a more 'organic' model of a city, rather than one that defies natural cycles as a detached 'machine.' He suggests pragmatic requirements, such as new regulations and policies that are the condition of moving us forward in a more meaningful way.

In chapter 3, Frank Cunningham describes the challenges that arise when one recognizes that cities fall into what he calls a 'grue-like category.' 'Grue,' a term that emerged from the philosophy of science, is coined from the combination of 'blue' and 'green.' If things are grue-like (never simply green or wholly blue), they are non-static, non-uniform. When environmental agendas aim to attain a balanced, 'holistic' vision, they cannot do justice to cities that can never conform to such essentializing categories. Cunningham explores the possibility of moving beyond these differences between a reified 'ecosystematicity' and a more fluid 'grueness' so that, ultimately, through a transformed civic culture, we may be more effective in greening the 'urban grue.'

The final chapter in this section similarly recognizes the challenges of integrating the natural and the urban and looks to the appropriation of our historical tradition for guidance. Peter Timmerman takes us back to the ancient roots of our literary interpretations, exploring images of nature and the city as they emerge through key classical texts. As he notes in the end, his survey reveals how not only fossil fuels, but fossilized categories, threaten natural cities.

All four authors recognize that a 'natural city' defies static, universalizing, and definitive categories. At the same time, they would likely all agree that this unencompassability of the term is not an indication of its paucity, but instead points to its very richness.

NOTE

- 1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 14.

1 In Search of the Natural City

INGRID LEMAN STEFANOVIC

Admittedly, the distinction between the natural and the non-natural requires detailed working out.

– Robert Elliot, ‘Faking Nature’¹

The term ‘natural city’ integrates two concepts that have a long history of separation and even opposition. Reflecting a dualistic paradigm that divides pristine notions of wilderness from the city, ‘nature’ is frequently seen primarily and benevolently as unsullied and salvific wilderness, while cities are viewed as baleful, concrete dens of ecological iniquity.

This chapter argues that a condition of any meaningful interpretation of the concept of the ‘natural city’ requires that we necessarily move beyond such a deeply rooted dualistic paradigm. As a first step, we will examine how the dualism manifests itself both empirically in current institutional settings, and in contemporary philosophical discourse. The continuing debate as to whether nature is a ‘real’ entity, existing independently of human awareness, or is socially constructed will be shown to assume the very bifurcation described above between natural environments and urban culture.

The aim, however, is also to explore ways in which we can begin to productively move beyond this deeply seated dualistic world view. A number of authors have begun to take innovative steps towards a more promising ontological paradigm that should better orient us in the search of a natural city.

Challenging the Nature/City Divide: Some Pragmatic Reflections

As cottagers seek their weekend escapes from the city, the bifurcation

between the 'natural' and the 'urban' continues to be deeply rooted in our everyday institutions and in our language. The United Nations *Environment* Programme, for instance, continues to function as a distinct entity from the United Nations Centre for *Human Settlements*. Urban planning and environmental programs are, typically, housed in different departments at our post-secondary institutions, and academics appear to identify with either 'urban' or 'environmental' issues rather than with their interface. For instance, 'between 1995 and 2000, of the 6,157 papers in the nine leading ecological journals, only 25 (0.2%) dealt with cities.'² Environmental ethicists persist in defining their field in terms of ethical responsibilities towards the *natural* environment – almost always excluding any mention of built places. Municipal, provincial, and federal governments typically separate environmental ministries or departments from those related to housing or urban issues.

To some degree, distinguishing diverse environmental experiences is only reasonable. One cannot deny that the sense of place that emerges in the midst of a pristine rainforest is markedly different from that of a bustling downtown metropolitan core. The very origin of these experiences reminds us that we did not have a hand in creating the planet or the rainforest, though human beings certainly play a significant role in the creation of cities.

Nevertheless, diverse as these experiences are, it is becoming increasingly evident that extremes of pristine nature, on the one hand, and artificially constructed environments, on the other, are, to use Finnish philosopher Helena Siipi's words, only 'abstractions.' Naturalness is not, in her words, 'an all-or-nothing affair but a continuous gradient ... Total naturalness is an abstract state at the end of a continuum and some ecosystems are closer to that ideal than others.'³ One can intuitively distinguish between an unploughed prairie and a shopping mall in terms of how closely they approximate 'ideal naturalness,' but to suggest that 'nature' and 'cities' are wholly separate, self-contained, and different entities is to engage in nothing less than simplistic abstraction.⁴

Certainly, while humans did not create this earth, we now know that humans are able to impact its climate, its landscapes, and the air and waters on a planetary scale. Similarly, cities themselves do not subsist independently of the vagaries of the natural world: urban areas are hardly immune to the effects of natural disturbances, a fact to which the residents of New Orleans and other cities that have been subjected

to natural disasters can attest all too well. The case for linking human and ecosystem health integrity is increasingly evident.

In fact, the essential belonging of human and natural systems is now more and more recognized to be integral to the meaning of sustainability itself. As far back as 1987, with the publication of the Brundtland Report, the important point was made that to build sustainably means to factor in socio-economic as well as environmental matters.⁵ No longer is it possible to mindlessly construct human settlements in isolation from the effects of natural environment constraints.

The fact is that cities simply do not subsist independently of the natural world. The water we drink and the air we breathe have passed through generations of living entities. Our urban gardens are nourished through the soil. On a grander scale, we now begin to see that our habits, polluting as they are, cannot be viewed independently of the health and well-being of the planet as a whole. 'Nature' is more than simply an escape from the concrete jungle; on the contrary, it sustains and permeates our existence – whether that is rural, urban, or situated in a northern wilderness that is now home to PCB residuals and glacial warming.

The natural environment envelops us, as is clearly reflected in the French word *environs*, meaning 'surroundings.' In our city gardens, the cardinal is a regular visitor, delighting us on a summer's day. His song awakens us to the trees, the lush green grasses, the aroma of the flowers, the bewildering meandering of insects along the rocks, and the broader ecosystem within which this remarkable bird rests. In my case, all of this occurs within the shadow of the Toronto megalopolitan setting – the largest urban conglomeration of settlements in Canada.

Urban naturalist and award-winning journalist Wayne Grady recalls his childhood in Windsor, Ontario, just across the border from Detroit, Michigan. 'Although I am a city boy,' he writes, 'I don't recall my parents or my teachers taking me out of the city to get fresh air.'⁶ While family stories revisit swimming trips and holidays to surrounding areas, Grady recollects little of those moments. He reflects,

What I remember is playing in an open field across the street from our house on Factoria Avenue, whole summers spent lying in tall grass beside a stream that ran through the field, watching grasshoppers and crickets, tadpoles and garter snakes. I blew the heads of dandelions, checked to see if my mother liked butter by holding a buttercup under her chin (she

always did), and punched air-holes in the lids of jam jars so I could collect the chrysalides of monarch butterflies and watch them hatch.⁷

Such memories are not uncommon for many who spent their childhoods in Canadian urban settings.

Grady reminds us that cities are not garrisons – ‘or at least, if they are,’ he adds, ‘they are highly ineffectual ones, for there is as much nature in the city as out of it.’⁸ He describes the antics of squirrels (‘tree rats’), sparrows, snakes, raccoons, gulls, and termites. He explores coyote dens hidden in the valleys of the city. He reminds us that over 300 species of birds are in residence in or regularly passing through Toronto. Grady also points to the world’s largest ring-billed gull colony, which exists on the Leslie Street Spit – built by humans from the 1970s construction rubble that was moved to accommodate many of the high-rises in the city’s downtown. That human-engineered spit is now home to 46 species of wildfowl, 258 species of birds (including Caspian terns, black-crowned night herons, and falcons), 34 species of plovers, and 283 species of vascular plants.⁹

According to Grady, ‘there is actually more nature in Toronto now than there used to be’ before the city evolved to this stage of urban development.¹⁰ Bats have been attracted to urban attics. Coyotes appeared first in Ontario in the 1940s only when they associated suburban parkland with their native Great Plains. Cockroaches would never have been a part of Toronto had they not travelled on slave ships from Africa, and would not have strayed north to Canada had we not invented central heating. Underground power cables and subway lines have provided accessible habitats for ever-evolving species of termites. Rabbits regularly grace our neighbourhoods. While not uniformly welcome in our cities, plant and animal species continue to emerge in complex, unexpected ways.

To be sure, it is naive to deny that many species have also been displaced or destroyed by the building of Toronto. That being said, the natural world is more resilient than we might have imagined. ‘Nature loves change,’ writes Grady. And nature pervades our urban experiences in ways that are closer than we might expect. It just may be the case that

to watch a dandelion head open and turn to the sun, or a pigeon pecking at grass seeds in the park, is to experience in one minute the history of life on this planet. And perhaps, by realizing that neither the dandelion

nor the pigeon nor the grass would be there were it not for us, we become aware of our own place in the great web of life.¹¹

‘Cities are artifacts,’ writes planner Witold Rybczynski – which may be true.¹² At the same time, as Grady reminds us, cities are also rich ecosystems that, thankfully, nature ultimately refuses to ignore. It is time that we began to recognize this fact, both within our academic settings and in our governmental institutions and public policies.

The Example of Urban Ecology: A New Vision of Integrative Planning

It must be said, of course, that recent decades have certainly brought a growing awareness of the earth’s rich and varied ecology, and of the serious threats posed to it by human activity. We now know that environmental degradation – including species extinction, habitat destruction, contaminated air and water, and global climate change – affects the health of both the planet and our species. Whether this knowledge is adequately being translated into positive action is open for debate; it is clear, however, that the environment is a growing element of public discussion.

Moreover, one is equally obliged to acknowledge that urban ecologists and other proponents of green cities are beginning to uncover ways of reintegrating nature into our human settlements, thereby taking important steps forward in challenging the engrained paradigm of a nature/city dualism. As celebrated anthropologist Margaret Mead once observed, cities are to humans what hives are to bees and dens are to foxes; cities can thus be viewed not as environmental aberrations, but rather as necessary moments in the unfolding of the human story. As such, they can be positive and ecologically sustainable, rather than environmentally malignant, developments – provided ecological integrity is both preserved and fostered within city limits.¹³

In the words of Charles Redman, director of Arizona State University’s Center for Environmental Studies, ‘the study of urban ecology is taking off in ... cities like Baltimore, Seattle, New York and especially abroad in Berlin, Sydney and many others.’ Redman challenges the common wisdom that there is ‘either nature or there are cities.’ On the contrary, he concludes, ‘There is nature in the city. The city is part of nature.’¹⁴

The field of urban ecology is now investigating the city in terms of

flows of energy, natural capital, biophysical cycles, biotic communities, and the 'ecological footprint' that human settlements assume.¹⁵ As journalist Alexander Stille points out,

ecologists are finding that cities are interesting, legitimate environments, with surprisingly high levels of biodiversity, and what's more, that understanding and protecting them may be crucial to our environmental future. From Paris, Rome and Cairo to New York, Baltimore and Phoenix, cities are all subjects of intense ecological study. Unesco is even thinking of making several major cities, including New York, biospheres, important natural areas to be protected.¹⁶

Ecologists have been surprised to find over 3,000 plant species within an 80-kilometre radius of the New York metropolitan area. The marshy wetlands near Kennedy Airport are cited as one of the largest nesting areas on the east coast.¹⁷ Empirically speaking, it is evident that nature infuses the city and, therefore, that separating the two concepts simply does not do justice to our lived experience.

The trend towards viewing the city as integrally linked to the natural environment is manifesting itself along many diverse fronts.¹⁸ Consider, for instance, the call to 'Smart Growth,' a term popularized in 1997 in the state of Maryland when its governor established a set of policies to direct resources at retrofitting existing infrastructure and preserving farmland and natural resources while discouraging investment that promoted urban sprawl.¹⁹ Across the national border, the Smart Growth Canada Network was launched in 2003 in an effort to 'help advance the implementation of smart growth and sustainability principles across the country through education, research and capacity building strategies for the broad range of decision makers.'²⁰ The network advocates 10 principles: encouraging affordable housing, walkable communities, smart building design, community renewal, green infrastructure, preservation of green space, integrated planning, varied transportation options, community involvement, and planning processes to facilitate investment in sustainable solutions. Provincial initiatives similarly tout smart growth: for example, the Ontario Smart Growth Network aims to 'help design compact and healthy communities – places you'd be proud to call "home."²¹ In each such instance, 'smart growth' symbolizes an initiative that promotes environmental sustainability and richer community viability in the development of urban settlement planning and design.

Urban planners and designers themselves are conceiving of their profession differently in light of environmentalism. Architect Ken Brooks described in a recent presentation to the Toronto Green Building Festival his vision of a 'biologically inspired city,' with biology driving decision making around water, energy, transportation, building systems, standards, neighbourhoods, and land use.²²

In fact, one of the most renowned examples of an urbanist's commitment to a new vision is Andres Duany, an outspoken critic of traditional suburban sprawl and subdivision development, and an advocate of sustainable design.²³ His 'New Urbanism' supports an empathetic, nostalgic revitalization of old urban centres with higher densities; mixed-use, walkable neighbourhoods; social diversity; and low-rise developments. In actual practice, places such as Seaside, Florida, designed by Duany and his partner, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, while lauded by many, have also been subject to the criticism that they cater to the middle and upper classes, producing densities far too low to support the ideals of sustainable walking communities to which they aspire. Nevertheless, the ideals of this 'New Urbanism' are felt by many to be moving in a more positive direction than many suburban developments, because of their emphasis on values such as community, environmental sustainability, and a strong sense of place.

Across the Atlantic, initiatives respecting the 'greening' of urban environments have been advancing in full force. In 1994, more than 2,000 local and regional authorities signed the charter of the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign, acknowledging that they 'shall integrate the principles of sustainability in all our policies and make the respective strengths of our cities and towns the basis of locally appropriate strategies.'²⁴ The Slow City movement similarly has member cities from across Europe. Targeted at urban scales with populations of less than 50,000, the movement aims to 'reinvent every aspect of urban life, by putting pleasure before profit, human beings before head office, slowness before speed.'²⁵ Integrating environmental with social, cultural, economic, and lifestyle concerns, the Slow City Manifesto supports over 50 pledges, such as 'cutting noise pollution and traffic, increasing green spaces and pedestrian zones, backing farmers who produce local delicacies and the shops and restaurants that sell them, and preserving local aesthetic traditions.'²⁶

In Canada, similar efforts to integrate environmental sustainability into urban planning are becoming increasingly evident. One example is the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, whose staff is working

to build 'a new kind of community – the Living City – where human settlement can flourish forever as part of nature's beauty and diversity.'²⁷ The City of Toronto itself is actively promoting a new policy to encourage citizens to 'Live Green.' The aim is to help 'neighbourhoods and communities turn green ideas into action.'²⁸ 'Green building,' 'green houses,' 'greening of the city' – each of these terms reflects widespread initiatives that are commendable. Seeking to minimize resource use and the production of waste, integrating open spaces, supporting local food production and alternative transportation systems – many of these initiatives are becoming mainstream, and they are specific instantiations of much of the essence behind any 'natural city.'

Important as these initiatives are, however, there is a risk that something essential is missing. Is the building of a 'natural city' simply a matter of integrating more parks into urban spaces? Of reducing the ecological footprint? Of encouraging local food production? Of mixed-use zoning? Moving forward will require more than assembling a compendium of such discrete initiatives. More important will be to consider a repositioning of fundamental values, paradigms, and world views that sustain these efforts in the long term. In the following section, we look to philosophers for some guidance on the meaning of the word 'nature' in the hope that we can begin to build a fuller understanding of what it is about the natural city that is particularly significant and unique.

Some Philosophical Reflections on the Nature/City Relation

The very words 'nature' and 'natural' have become suspect in contemporary philosophical discourse. To refer to human 'nature' is often seen to be an insidious slipping back into substance metaphysics – into a universalizing, essentializing language that denies cultural, linguistic, and social diversity. In a postmodern age of moral pluralism, talk of a uniform, hypostatized human 'nature,' for instance, is seen to be either philosophically naive or misguided.²⁹

To be sure, despite this critical trend, discussion of the meaning of the word 'nature' has filled journals and libraries. Debates rage over a variety of issues. For instance, in an era when society has planetary environmental impacts, is it naive to speak of the value of pristine nature? In fact, is virgin nature 'better' than nature cultivated and, if so, on what basis?³⁰ While environmentalists often glorify the notion of pristine nature, what is natural is not always seen to be of value.

Disease is 'natural,' as are volcanic eruptions and earthquake disasters – but instead of welcoming such events, we seek to avoid or to control them.³¹ The natural, in such cases, is not always to be equated with an unequivocal good.

Yet we do tend, nevertheless, towards some kind of positive valuation of the natural world. As environmental philosopher Robert Kirkman notes, 'nature is everyone's favourite weapon: it is common practice to label something as "natural" in order to establish its value beyond dispute.'³² In fact, philosophers such as Aldo Leopold have developed their environmental prescriptions by linking moral virtue specifically with the environment. In his famous pronouncement, Leopold states that 'a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.'³³ Critics charge that Leopold here commits a logical fallacy (the so-called naturalistic fallacy) by confusing the description of what 'is' with the prescription of what 'ought to be': for instance, just because a neighbourhood *is* designed around the residents' collective support and reliance upon automobiles does not mean that it *ought to be* so designed. Similarly, just because an initiative preserves the beauty of a biotic community does not necessarily imply that it is an initiative we *ought* to support. Perhaps criteria other than beauty or biotic integrity are more important. Still, Leopold's supporters are not convinced, and they continue to argue instead that there is a certain moral order that nature reveals to the attentive listener.³⁴

Another sort of debate that rages throughout the literature relates to the question of whether nature is simply a social construct, or whether wilderness has an objective 'reality' of its own, independent of the human, valuing consciousness.³⁵ In many ways, this debate assumes a subject/object dualism that is mirrored in the conceptual bifurcation of cities and human culture on the one hand, and untouched, 'objective' nature on the other. Does nature exist as intrinsically valuable, independent of the human consciousness, or is nature only meaningful by virtue of human interpretive horizons?

In a postmodern era, there has been growing scepticism about the validity of describing any reality as 'objective' or independent of human valuation and interpretation, when such independence is meaningful only within the very framework of conscious awareness. For instance, Phil Macnaghten and John Urry argue against the theory of 'environmental realism,' which holds that 'the environment is essentially a "real entity"' that operates separately from human practice and thereby

'has the power to produce unambiguous, observable and rectifiable outcomes.'³⁶ Instead, the authors maintain that 'there is no singular "nature" as such, only a diversity of contested natures,' and that 'each such nature is constituted through a variety of socio-cultural processes from which such natures cannot be plausibly separated.'³⁷

To be sure, the authors' critiques extend also to other reifying tendencies in philosophy, such as 'environmental idealism,' which claims that the best way to understand nature is to address various 'underlying, stable and consistent' values that support, in some universalizing fashion, our interpretation of nature.³⁸ Finally, they are equally set against 'environmental instrumentalism,' which is built upon 'straightforwardly determined calculations of individual and/or collective interests' and is linked to a standardized, 'marketized naturalistic model of human behaviour.'³⁹ In each of these areas, the authors make a strong case for an alternative understanding of nature that avoids the tendency towards universalizing abstractions and a denial of the 'sheer messiness of the "environment" and the diverse species which happen to inhabit the globe,' arguing instead for an approach that recognizes 'the significance of embedded social practices.'⁴⁰

In many ways, arguments such as Macnaghten and Urry's are compelling: they recognize that 'nature' is meaningful in many different ways, because of divergent social, cultural, linguistic, and historical perspectives. Who can deny that the modern-day real estate developer sees Toronto's Lake Ontario waterfront from a fundamentally different perspective from that experienced by the Haudenosaunee people who lived on these same lands prior to their colonization by European settlers? One may wish to say that the lake remains a lake, but it is obviously understood and constituted differently by divergent societal perspectives.

On the other hand, critics of the social construction of nature argue that collapsing the natural world within human social and linguistic categories is deeply problematic. David Kidner, for example, suggests that the inevitable result is a denigration of nature, a reduction to exclusively human, 'anthropocentric' categories that only distance us further from the richness of the natural world.⁴¹ Eileen Crist similarly criticizes the social construction of nature as indirectly supporting the human 'colonization' of the earth. She argues that in its privileging of human cognitive sovereignty, and in collapsing science into mere discourse, the constructivist approach is thereby unable to take the scientific study of environmental biodiversity seriously.⁴²

To this day, the debate continues to rage between those who, on the one hand, feel that 'nature' is a 'reality' unto itself, independent of the human valuing consciousness and thereby subject to rational, objective scientific scrutiny; and those who, on the other hand, feel that interpretations of the 'natural' are always socially embedded and culturally dependent.⁴³ Even surveys of professional philosophers, such as the 'PhilPapers Survey' of 3,226 respondents, are framed in a way that recognizes these tendencies, noting, for instance, that when it comes to epistemic justification, 42.7 per cent 'accept or lean toward externalism,' while 26.4 per cent 'accept or lean toward internalism' – and 30.8 per cent choose an 'other' alternative.⁴⁴ Whether defining one's epistemic tendencies or aesthetic values, they are typically framed to this day within a dualistic subject/object context.

Certainly, until one is clear about where one stands on this issue, trying to provide a firm philosophical foundation for an understanding of the 'natural city' is a challenge, to say the least. For instance, one might wonder: Is the concept of a 'natural city' simply another instance of reification and modernist essentializing tendencies? Is 'nature' in the city socially constructed in similar ways to our constructions of pristine environments? Do rat colonies in subway systems bear witness to the hidden, but very 'real' manifestations of nature in urban areas? And how, in the end, do these questions affect a philosophical justification of a 'natural city'?

My own view is that neither a subjectivistic nor objectivist stance can do justice, either to the meaning of the natural world or to cities. In fact, an interesting alternative take on this debate is offered by Adrian Ivakhiv, a professor of religious studies and anthropology, who suggests that this very polarization between epistemological realists and social constructivists is itself reflective of the long-standing modernist tradition that distinguishes subjective and objective realities. Just as the father of modern philosophy, René Descartes, posited a dualism between the rational human subject and the non-thinking world of objects, 'a parallel dichotomy underpins the modern idea that things natural and things cultural constitute two different orders of reality, with humans on one side of the boundary and nonhuman animals (and everything else) on the other.'⁴⁵ The debate between the scientific realists and the social constructivists parallels a nature-culture dualism that 'has in turn given rise to the basic intellectual division of labor in academia, that between the natural sciences and the humanities and social sciences.'⁴⁶

Not only is the conversation about the social construction of nature (or its independent existence) entrenched in a long tradition of Cartesian dualism but, from a practical perspective, that conversation is ill suited to the real challenges we face in today's environmental crisis. As Ivakhiv explains, 'phenomena like global climate change, ozone holes, AIDS and other viruses, genetic and reproductive technologies and so on, are merely the latest in a long line of phenomena that cannot be fully understood from within the segregated vantage points of either scientific realism or social constructivism.'⁴⁷ Since these phenomena (no less than the challenges of sustainability and natural cities) are both 'real' as well as subject to narrative discourse, we must look to transdisciplinary research that spans the sciences, social sciences, and humanities in order to best understand and address them.

In fact, Ivakhiv raises an important challenge to explore the space between the natural and the cultural, and begins to describe what he terms a 'multicultural ecology' as a new direction for thought – one that would 'recognize the nonessentialist, processual and dialogical nature of cultural-ecological interaction, which is always embedded within signifiatory and discursive practices and materially embodied ecological relations.'⁴⁸ Building upon a variety of perspectives, including the phenomenological recognition that intentional consciousness is always 'consciousness of,' Ivakhiv is hoping to avoid focusing on 'nature' and 'culture' as two distinct entities, acknowledging instead the need to attend to the relationship between them.

Certainly, such a shift carries some risks. Consider, for instance, Bruno Latour's contention that 'the very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off. Cultures – different or universal – do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures.'⁴⁹ There is merit in Latour's stand but, at the same time, philosopher Holmes Rolston III also has a point when he argues that 'we do not want entirely to transform the natural into the cultural, nor do we want entirely to blend the cultural into the natural. Neither realm ought to be reduced to, or homogenized with, the Other.'⁵⁰ In Rolston's view,

It is only philosophical confusion to remark that both geese in flight, landing on Yellowstone Lake, and humans in flight, landing at O'Hare in Chicago, are equally natural, and let it go at that. No interesting philosophical analysis is being done until there is insightful distinction into the differences between the ways humans fly in their engineered, financed jets and

the ways geese fly with their genetically constructed, metabolically powered wings. Geese fly naturally; humans fly in artifacts.⁵¹

Rolston reminds us that ‘answers come in degrees, with Times Square on one end of a spectrum and the Absaroka Wilderness on another.’⁵² He is wary of those philosophers who simply collapse the distinction because, in so doing, there is a danger that the givenness of the natural world will be forgotten and subsumed simply within human constructs.

Both Ivakhiv and Rolston raise important issues here. In describing the ‘natural city,’ we neither wish to collapse the natural within the urban, nor to confound their tenuous relationship. What I think is helpful is to recognize, with phenomenology, that nature is not simply a reality ‘out there’ any more than it is merely a matter of subjective ‘discourse.’⁵³ It makes good sense to ensure that the ‘natural’ encompasses both a recognition of the fact that we did not create the earth and that, in that sense, it is *given*, and, at the same time, a recognition that we do certainly actively engage and impact upon the earth. And we do so in multiple, diverse ways inasmuch as we are socially, culturally, and linguistically embedded in an ontological relationship with the world that defines us in our very way of being.

Towards an Ontology of the Natural City

How can we begin to explore the natural city in non-dualistic terms, focusing instead upon the diverse spaces that emerge between the ‘natural’ and the ‘cultural’? Phenomenology has always aimed to avoid lapsing into a reified description of either a solipsistic subjective world or an apparently ‘objective’ reality that is said to subsist independently of interpretive structures of understanding. Might we take some clues from phenomenology in an effort to shed new light on the meaning of a natural city?

German thinker Martin Heidegger offers us some guidelines when he describes the essential belonging together of building and dwelling. ‘The way in which you are and I am,’ he writes, ‘the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling.’⁵⁴ Inasmuch as we exist, we exist somewhere and, in that sense, we are fundamentally implicated.⁵⁵ Cities are not merely artificial, material artifacts but are the incarnation of our existence. ‘I am the space where I am,’ writes Noël Arnaud, emphasizing the integral belonging of human existence to built place.⁵⁶

In that vein, a natural city is not simply a reference to a geographical location or physical spatial scale but, instead, it points to the phenomenon of human dwelling. Decades ago, Greek architect and planner Constantinos A. Doxiadis indicated that to be human means to settle: even when we seek refuge under a single tarp, that shelter reminds us that to live is to bide our time – even if only temporarily – in place.⁵⁷ Such settlement can occur on many scales – from tent to villages and towns, to cities, and even to ecumenopolis, the urbanized planet or what Doxiadis called ‘the inevitable *city* of the future.’⁵⁸ Like Doxiadis here, we use the term ‘city’ metaphorically, not to indicate a particular population size but to suggest a mode of settlement that is ultimately respectful of civic engagement and, thereby, of social, cultural, regulatory, technological, economic, and ecological functions.

Moreover, the metaphor of the natural city also aims to pay heed to the ontological roots of human experience – to the multiple and diverse ways of human *being* in the world. To be in place, as I have shown elsewhere, is to engage with one’s environment both rationally and calculatively – as well as pre-thematically.⁵⁹ When the city evokes a sense of disorientation, confusion, stress, or apprehension; when building indiscriminately gorges on resources; when social inequalities breed discrimination; when cultural prejudice breeds hatred; when inappropriate technologies are wasteful and heavy handed; when economics are short-sighted, and when a sense of place is at risk, we implicitly know that this ‘unnatural’ place is not one to which we belong.

Some years ago, architect Christopher Alexander defined natural cities as those that have arisen ‘more or less spontaneously over many, many years.’ By contrast, artificial cities have been ‘deliberately created by designers and planners.’⁶⁰ Alexander felt that there was growing recognition that something essential was missing from artificial cities such as the British New Towns or Levittown. The human mind, he argued, was structured in such a way as to reduce ambiguity by categorizing and grouping mental constructs into simplified patterns. In the neat, compartmentalizing designs of artificial cities, we trade the ‘humanity and richness of the living city for a conceptual simplicity which benefits only designers, planners, administrators and developers.’⁶¹ A natural city is one that respects diversity; one that arises organically; one that invites local community engagement; one that respects not only ecological limits but the richness and diversity of historically grounded, ontological roots of human well-being.

To be sure, the kind of ‘natural cities’ that Alexander describes

typically did arise through a long, intergenerational process of building, and one that was not always thematically, explicitly understood or articulated in terms of specific design principles. The challenge of dwelling in contemporary cities – especially in light of the speed and scale of their development – is to try to elicit a fuller understanding of how to self-consciously recreate these robust urban places that previously emerged spontaneously and unself-consciously.

Certain thinkers are addressing this very issue. Geographer and environment-behaviour researcher David Seamon speaks to the need to ‘make design students more aware of the importance of the natural and built environments in human life.’⁶² He is convinced that efforts at ‘place restoration must be comprehensive existentially and incorporate both intellect and feeling, both knowledge and intuition, both scientific understanding and an instinctive sense of what is right for nature and for particular places.’⁶³ Citing phenomenologist Ted Relph’s earlier works, Seamon reminds us that ‘as the deepest kind of lived involvement with place, existential insideness is a situation in which people are normally unaware of the importance of place in sustaining their everyday world. They experience their place without direct attention, yet that place is rife with overriding but tacitly unnoticed significances.’⁶⁴

The challenge is to better understand such ‘insideness’ and elicit design guidelines in order to thematically incorporate such an understanding within the natural cities that we build. In thinker Ronald H. Brady’s words, ‘the activity of intentionality, like other potential perceptions, escapes detection in ordinary consciousness because it is not brought into focus.’⁶⁵ How might the pre-thematic, taken-for-granted, intentional activity of building natural cities be better articulated and ‘brought into focus’?

In some sense, architects such as Christopher Alexander have already begun such work. In both *A Pattern Language* and *The Nature of Order*, Alexander articulates a theory of wholeness in urban design while also suggesting how specific design elements can reflect a sense of belonging and order.⁶⁶ Similarly significant work has been undertaken by Bill Hillier, who also attempts to articulate a holistic sense of place by identifying essential networks that reveal a ‘space syntax’ in urban settings.⁶⁷ In each of these cases, the attempt is made to bring to light an ordering of built spaces that reflect essential existential structures, as well as broader environmental and even cosmological meaning.

How might philosophers contribute to this conversation? Presumably, there is always more to learn about how the unself-conscious

process of building 'natural cities' occurs. There is always more to learn about how to better articulate that process and what sort of world views are best incorporated into the design of a natural city. It is particularly in terms of this latter task that phenomenologists may have significant insights.

Philosopher Mark Sagoff has suggested that one can understand the 'natural' in four senses: (1) in opposition to the 'supernatural' and, in that sense, somewhat trivially as 'everything in the universe'; (2) as sacred creation; (3) as the opposite of the 'artificial'; and (4) as 'that which is authentic or true to itself.'⁶⁸ Personally, I am particularly interested in how the city might remain 'authentic or true to itself.'

Again, perhaps Heidegger can guide us here, by reminding us that *natura* comes from the Latin *nasci*, meaning "'to be born, to originate" ... *Natura* means "that which lets something originate from itself."⁶⁹ Robert Elliot asks us to consider why environmental restoration projects ('faking nature') are so rarely able to return mined areas to their authentic, 'natural' condition. He rightly suggests that the manner of a landscape's genesis matters, just as much as or more than the number of replanted trees.⁷⁰ When we speak about something being 'natural,' we are implicitly saying something about the depth of its origins.

Delving further into the roots of Western metaphysical history, Heidegger reflects on how the ancient Greek roots of the word lead us back to the notion of *physis* – more than merely the root of physics but, rather, 'the realm of emerging and abiding ... a shining appearing ... The essence of Being is *physis*.'⁷¹ Nature as *physis* refers to the process of self-emergence that arises and endures, that appears while also withdrawing into the mystery of self-concealment. The origins of nature, in this sense, refer to the temporal unfolding of Being itself – 'the self-concealing revealing, *physis* in the original sense.'⁷² Nature, in this reading, guides us to the very origins and legacy of our cosmos.

Recognizing the givenness of nature as *physis* takes us back to the reflections of Holmes Rolston III, who invites us to teach the people visiting Yellowstone Park and other wilderness areas that 'nature is the ground of culture, that culture transcends nature, that humans emerge from nature. But teach them too that nature is a womb that humans never entirely leave.'⁷³ It is important that we act with humility: our sense of technological empowerment often hides the fact of our originary dependence upon a natural world that exceeds our control and precedes our own appearance upon this planet. To that extent, we must pay heed to the wonder of the world as *given*. Whether we stop