This is an electronic version of an article published as: Alexander, D. (2002). Our place in the world. Alternatives Journal, 28(3), 1.

Alternatives Journal is available online at: http://www.alternativesjournal.ca/.
OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD

This issue of Alternatives explores how the built environment—the physical structures making up our cities, towns and villages—influences our relationships with nature and our fellow human beings. The basic insight expressed in the various theme articles is that if we wish to improve these relationships, we will need to transform much of the modern built environment. We will need to (re)construct places so that they reflect and reinforce the values of community and ecology rather than maximize the free flow of dollars, goods and automobiles, as has been the tendency throughout much of the past century. In other words, we have to go beyond the modernist agenda.

The limitation of this agenda is shown by Ned Jacobs in his analysis of Robert Moses’ efforts to “urban renew” a portion of New York’s Greenwich Village in the 1960s. Laura Taylor’s description of how “efficient” road building led to the loss of a sense of place in a rural environment north of Toronto also helps us understand the place-destructiveness of the modernist dynamic.

The theory and practice of modernism—with its emphasis on superficial order, mechanical efficiency, separation of land uses, and low-density development—has contributed to the global ecological crisis by increasing the ecological footprints of our cities and by fostering the alienation of urban residents from their immediate environment and from one another. Incremental change of the sort described in many of the articles that follow can help start us on the path to greater sustainability by enriching the places we inhabit ecologically and experientially.

For instance, Ingrid Stefanovic’s article suggests that a trail network can be used to educate and reconnect people to the places where they live, and Jeremy Lundholm’s article suggests that by “place jamming” we can bring the feel of wild nature back into the city to reanimate our senses.

Holly Pearson’s article on Belltown in Seattle shows how a diverse inner-city neighbourhood can attempt to defend its sense of place against gentrification by generating development proposals that are a more appropriate fit for the neighbourhood. Nik Luka and Leo Trottier argue that we will make more progress in changing the trajectory of suburban development if we better understand how suburban communities meet the needs of their current residents.

Other articles in this issue provide us with specific tools: a quiz for reacquainting ourselves with place; techniques for animating public space and engaging citizen dialogue; organizational models for involving local people in environmental monitoring; and rituals for acknowledging our interdependence with other beings.

In the end, the built and natural environments can be seen as a key battleground between a modernist worldview, which focuses on the utilitarian use of space, and other conceptions of the ecological and social order that are oriented to the value of place. This is not a battle that will be decided once and for all—in a revolutionary cataclysm that sweeps away the old. Rather, it will be fought incrementally, lot by lot, building by building, city district by city district, official plan by official plan.

We need not completely reinvent our cities and rural areas. Much is healthy and vibrant there, and worthy of protection, despite a legacy of past errors. More it is a question of defending what is healthy and seeking to extend its range until it eventually becomes the predominant way of organizing space.

Modernism has its silver lining: by putting at risk the places we value, it has forced us to rethink how we might build environments that are beautiful, ecological, functional for a greater range of people and species, and that nurture the seeds of a civic culture. This issue is dedicated to those who are demonstrating how this work of authentic place-making can be undertaken in all its myriad forms.

— Don Alexander

[Signature]