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Sacred Sites of the Morris Arboretum

Title: Sacred Sites of the Morris Arboretum

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Abstract:

This research project is designed to measure stakeholder's "sacred" sites of the Morris Arboretum. Sacred sites can take a variety of forms: a bench, a view, a feature, statute, a tree, or a region of the garden. I use the term sacred to instill a stronger feeling than the word "favorite." I encourage people to choose sites that they feel a psychological affinity with. The survey is made up of two parts, with the visitor map of the Arboretum on one side and a questionnaire on the back side. The stakeholders of the Arboretum that I distributed surveys to include: visitors, members, volunteers, board members and staff.

Stakeholders are asked to circle sites they deem "sacred" on the map. There is no limit to how many sites one can circle. If they circle more than one site they are asked to rank the order of significance of the various sites. This is a subjective and personal survey. The surveys are compiled and all sites are recorded. From compiling the data to one spreadsheet one is able to see which sites measure among the most sacred/significant to stakeholders. A range of characteristics can contribute to why a site is sacred to stakeholders.

I hope to provide basic information that people can use in the future to make more correlations. My purpose with this project is to help initiate a conversation between stakeholders and the executive board in the planning process/future master planning process. Because of the participatory role the survey requires, I hope this active involvement encourages a strong and lasting bond between the Arboretum and its stakeholders. From a horticultural view point, I hope that this information is used to protect these "sacred" sites in future master planning.

Sacred Sites of the Morris Arboretum

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INTRODUCTION

As humans, we are continually building bonds with our surrounding environments. These bonds can be encouraged through successful landscape design and/or land conservation. A combination of community development, planning, and environmental psychology can provide not only a rich understanding of how planning impacts our experience of place, but also how community-focused emotions, cognitions, and behaviors can impact community planning and development. (Finding Common Ground: The Importance of Place Attachment to Community Participation and Planning. Manzo, Perkins. P 336)

If we design with people in mind, we can salvage and foster a relationship between people and nature. Public institutions, such as the Morris Arboretum, which strive to educate the public about horticulture, should be sensitive to the needs of its stakeholders. An individual's bond to a place can be diminished if the place is destroyed or changed. Once a site is destroyed or becomes unrecognizable it is hard to return to that same place and feel all emotions and the bond you once felt.

In a majority of community development projects, residents' connection to a space is often overlooked. Although change is necessary at times for economic and community development, it should be approached with more caution. Too often the environment is destroyed in order to build a new shopping plaza. Destruction of land is a reactionary process. People have bonds to the environment. For example, their bonds may be destroyed if they were attached to a field that was just devastated for a new Wal-Mart. It is important for residents to become involved in the development process so that spaces can be preserved and therefore the residents' bonds are preserved. I feel in order to salvage and promote a relationship between people and nature, people's opinions and bonds should be taken into consideration in community redesign.

My project strives to start the conversation between stakeholders and those making executive decisions. The conversation begins with a survey, the "sacred sites survey." The survey asks stakeholders to share their sacred sites. Sacred sites have a broad ranging definition. Sacred sites can be spaces that allow people to connect with traditions, history, and/or personal memories. A sacred site can be a space where one feels a spiritual connection or where one finds relaxation. The term "sacred" was inspired by the work of the landscape architect and professor at UC Berkeley, Randolph Hester. He approaches the world of landscape architecture with the concept of designing for "ecological democracy." The part I am interested in is the democracy component. "Democracy is government by the people." (Hester, Randolph. *Design for Ecology Democracy*, p. 120.) I hope to encourage the democratic space that the Arboretum offers to its visitors. Having a democratic space from which each visitor can take away their own experience is important to its success as an institution, but also listening to visitors and giving them the opportunity to voice their opinions/concerns, is just as important.

My survey is analogous to Hester's redesign of the town of Manteo, North Carolina. Hester and a team of designers were hired to revitalize the central waterfront of Manteo. Disagreements erupted because residents felt that the contemplated changes would destroy their quality of life (p. 118). In response to the residents' concerns and disagreements, the designers devised ways of communicating with them through interviews and surveys in the newspaper. The designers

devised a list of places that residents were willing to change to accommodate tourism and places residents were unwilling to sacrifice. The designers then collected all this data and a list of significant places resulted. These significant places were spaces the residents were not willing to sacrifice. The designers termed these “Sacred Structures of Manteo.” “The loss of such places would reorder or destroy something or some social process essential to the community’s collective well being.” (Hester, Randolph, p. 120)

Taking an interdisciplinary approach when designing is important to the success of the space. These “sacred structures” are spaces that connect residents to Manteo. By creating a survey that measures stakeholders’ “sacred” sites at the Arboretum, the Arboretum can then work towards preserving, conserving, and restoring those sites that in turn connect stakeholders to the Arboretum. If we remain ignorant of stakeholders’ bonds, these bonds could be destroyed, or diminished through poor future master planning. When these connections diminish so does the relationship between the public and the Arboretum. The Arboretum could suffer from loss of memberships and visitors. I hope my project builds awareness of the importance of the public participation in future master planning.

METHODS

I created a survey to measure stakeholders’ sacred spaces. The survey is made up of two parts, a front and a back. One side contains the current visitor map of the Arboretum. The other side contains the survey. The survey sheet contains my intentions with the survey, the task at hand, what I mean by a “sacred” space, questions to guide their thinking, and supplemental information. The supplemental information asks: how many times one has been to the Arboretum, participants’ age, and if they would like to see any changes come to the Arboretum. I distributed surveys to stakeholders of the Arboretum. Stakeholders include all users of the Arboretum; visitors, staff, board members, volunteers, and members. They are only required to have been to the Arboretum at least once in their life. The task at hand asks the participant to circle areas on the map that seem sacred to them. They were invited to write explanations and personal stories on the survey. If they did not feel their sacred site was illustrated on the map they were given, they were encouraged to make clarifying notes. They could choose as many or as few sites as they wanted. If they choose more than one site, I ask that they rank the sites in order of significance to them.

RESULTS

After the surveys were completed and collected, the data was compiled. To date there have been 77 different spaces designated as “sacred” by stakeholders. Since there was no limit on how many sites people could choose, some people chose one site while others chose five or more. As I collected the surveys, I numbered them so I could refer back to each one according to its numerical name. I have compiled the findings into three different documents. As each survey was collected I numbered them beginning with 1, then 2, and so on. I then summarized the sacred sites mentioned, in numerical order of the surveys. I have attached an example of this at the end of the paper. Another document is an Excel spreadsheet that displays the all the sites mentioned. Next to each site I recorded the number of times it was mentioned. For example, the Rose Garden was mentioned 24 times, therefore next to the “Rose Garden,” I have the number 24. The sites are listed in order from least significant (mentioned once) to most “sacred” sites (mentioned on several surveys). The final document I created was a list of things people would like to see come to the Arboretum. People were not required to fill out this part of the survey, but for those who had suggestions, I recorded them. At the end of the paper is a columns graph representing the disbursement of sacred sites (as of March 16, 2011). It graphs the sites in order of significance (how many times they were mentioned).

DISCUSSION

No matter what the results were, I wanted to provide information to the Arboretum that could be useful to the various departments. I wanted to begin a conversation between stakeholders and the Arboretum, as well as leave information that could be built upon in the future.

I started this project with a few assumptions. For example, I had ideas about which spaces people would be deemed sacred. Although some of my assumptions proved to be correct, I also learned a lot about “sacred” sites in the process. I had a great time making correlations between and hypotheses from the information I received. I also discovered challenges and oversights that could not have been discovered without trial and error.

There were several challenges with the survey. The first challenge was that there were no limits on the number of sacred spaces one could choose. Therefore some people chose one site, while others chose more than seven sites. Since I did not limit anyone to the number of spaces they could choose, I had to forgo some control over the project. Measuring the bond of one person compared to another person is nearly impossible.

A second challenge was encouraging people to take their time on the survey. The time people spent on the survey varied. Some people rushed through the surveying neglecting to fill out any of the supplemental information. Other people took their time, expanding with personal stories and memories of the sites. I found that a majority of the people that took their time with the survey were staff members or volunteers, both who have a lot invested in the Arboretum.

A third challenge was difficulty in reading a map. An individual who is not familiar with the Arboretum may have a hard time orienting themselves on the map provided. This leads to

participants circling one area but explaining it as another. It then is left up to me to judge which area they meant to circle. I have struggled trying to interpret their intent.

Another challenge occurred when people filled their survey out with others. I noticed people in groups of two and three tended to mark the same sites. They could very well have the same sacred sites. For instance, if a man proposed marriage to a woman in a certain area, they could both feel that site is sacred. Although there may be some overlap, this exercise is meant for people to share their personal sacred sites.

An additional challenge was that I did not limit people to choose existing site or sites that no longer exist. Some participants picked sites, specifically trees, which have been removed. Although this is a challenge to the project, it can also be beneficial information. This information can help staff think about possibly replacing these “sacred” trees.

What I found really interesting was how the sites chosen by participants generally correlated with how many times they had been to the Arboretum. Stakeholders who have been to the Arboretum a dozen or more times picked more obscure, hidden spaces. This could just be that the more time you spend in an area, the more corners you are going to discover and the more opportunities you have to explore. Participants who have been to the Arboretum less than four times picked more features. Most of the features are visible from the pedestrian path. On a visitor’s first couple of times to the Arboretum, they are most likely going to follow the pedestrian path that the Arboretum has laid out for them. Therefore the features are the spaces they most likely experience during their first few visits.

I created a drawing made up of trace layers that provide a visual representation to the audience. Through the use of these trace layers one can look at the spatial relationship of the sacred sites recorded. The visuals are layers of trace that portray existing conditions and the spatial relationship between sacred spaces. There are five layers: hydrology, vehicular and pedestrian traffic circulation, vegetation (existing canopies), sacred viewpoints, and sacred spaces. The sacred viewpoints represent specific spaces in which people stand to enjoy the view from that spot, or the bench they enjoy sitting in.

These existing elements are important to the sacredness of sites. For instance, a site may be more sacred if it is near water or a site may lose sacredness if a pedestrian path runs next to it. Once these layers are placed upon each other, the spatial relationship between the elements and sacred sites is portrayed. The trace layers provide the audience with a visual image of the sacred sites of the Arboretum and their relationship to natural and installed elements.

This visual representation can be helpful for future development plans. For example, if the Arboretum is looking to build restrooms in the future, they can determine where to put them by the negative space on the map (negative space being the lack of sacred spaces). The layers can help determine where a new path should or should not be. The installation of a path could jeopardize the sacredness of a site. The trace layers help translate the information I have received into a visual piece. The results, the trace layers, and the compiled data are just a foundation of information and findings, all of which can be built upon in the future.

CONCLUSION

I am passionate about engaging people and nature, what is it that makes the two connect, and what makes people feel they have a moral responsibility to be environmental stewards. This project allowed me to understand the spaces at the Arboretum to which people feel a connection. An overarching goal was beginning a conversation between stakeholders and the decision making process. It was Hester's approach of "Ecological Democracy" that got me thinking about how I could incorporate my interests with something that would be beneficial to the Morris Arboretum. I was interested in looking at the decision making process, how decisions are made within the Horticulture Department and how these decisions could influence one's experience at the Arboretum. To secure stakeholders' connections to the Arboretum I think it is important to hear their opinions on spaces they feel should not be altered.

"The inclusion of sacred places in the discussion changes the dimensions of decision making." (Hester, Randolph, p 125) Through my surveys, I am striving to engage the public in the decision-making process. Public institutions depend on its stakeholders' commitment and support. I hope the information that has been collected will be useful in influencing the executive board's decisions.

Making sacredness a part of the Arboretum planning process can lead to the preservation of aspects of the garden that are most important to its constituents.

This information is groundwork that can continue to be built upon in years to come. The more the Arboretum engages its supporters, the more it builds bonds with its stakeholders. The information collected can also provide supplemental information to the various departments. This survey can benefit various departments: marketing, development, and horticulture. Marketing can use the images of the most sacred sites in advertising. Through the use of familiar spaces and sites at the Arboretum, they can reach out and make that connection with their audience. The development office can use the information to promote financial support and encourage site restoration for sacred sites. Having a copy of the completed surveys can help with finding funding and support for these sacred sites. The survey is way of engaging its members and promoting stronger relationships. The horticulture department can use the trace layers to look at positive and negative space, how more sacred spaces can be created, and how they can be preserved.

"To succeed, the planners must confront very real functional and economic issues. Landscape Master Planning is as much a creative exercise in preservation and enhancement as it is an exploration of realistic development and pedagogical opportunities." (Rolland and Towers, Smith College 1994 Master Plan). As with my survey, I hope it will support functional as well as economic issues. A master plan should take into consider the social and cultural interaction between the stakeholders, the landscape, and the educational objectives of the institution.

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Hester, Randy. "Subconscious Landscapes of the Heart." *Places* 2.3 (1985): 10-22. Print.

Hiss, Tony. "The Sacred Sites That Make a Neighborhood." Editorial. *NY Times: Real Estate Section*. New York Times, 12 Mar. 1995. Web. 9 Sept. 2010.

Janice McFarlan, among other staff members

Surveys to Visitors, Board Members-Personal Interviews

http://ncsdesign.org/content/index.cfm/fuseaction/alum_profile/departmentID/5/startRow/3). North Carolina State Alumni Web Site.

(Future Sources) Internet Course, Historical Archives in Gates Hall, Morris Arboretum.

What people would like to see come to the Arboretum:

A pair of swans
Giant wooden insects (a return visit)
New restrooms
More summer concerts
Ongoing maintenance to the wetland trails
Tagging (assuming accession tags needs to be put on all trees)
More sculpture
Veggie garden
New sign paneling (for Oak allee, mansion site, swan pond, etc)
Delicious restaurant
BG maps, like Longwood, available online
“Do not add too much stuff”
More summer activities: with alcohol targeted toward various groups focused on different parts
of the garden
Children’s activities
More natives
Vegetable garden for kids
Another Patrick Dougherty sculpture
Open earlier in the morning
More planned views
Cheaper prices for seminars-\$14 is way too much
A way to transport handicapped people
Better group meeting place
There should be a discussion about preservation vs. restoration vs. conservation
More sculpture exhibits
Public, pedestrian entrance at Germantown/Hillcrest
An aquatic garden with more water lilies, lotus, etc. with stepping stones across
A pier over the wetlands
Picnic areas
Trash cans
Small playground
Education Building
Douglas Fir
Native Mt. Ash
Barn owls, wood thrush
Wish we were open later in the day
Bonsai collection

Suggested improvements:

Inside the Visitor Center, show pictures of events that happened at the Arboretum in the past several weeks, such as trees, plants, and flowers in bloom, birds, and animals seen. Need to improve access to Wetland area.

The *Out on a Limb* structure is a clever idea for a tree house; however, the silver galvanized metal fails aesthetically. It should've been made with corten steel (the material that oxidizes to a rust color) for a better contextual relationship with the landscape.

Ladies restroom in the basement of Widener could use an upgrade/cleaning/repair. The same wasp nest has been there for 2 years.

