



Tampa, Florida
Photo Credit: Matthew Paulson

The Natureful City: Special Expressions of Nature

By Tim Beatley

Chelsea Johnson remembers well when she got word that the homebuilders association in Tampa was trying to push through changes in the city’s iconic tree protection ordinance. These changes would have made it much easier for developers and homebuilders to cut and clear trees that stood in the way of new construction. Put another way, it apparently would allow “clear-cutting” on residential lots. The proposal seemingly came out of nowhere.

Johnson was the president of the South Tampa Neighborhood Association and, as she explained to me in a recent phone call, was not especially knowledgeable about trees or the city’s tree protection ordinance when she heard about the eleventh-hour proposal. However, she did know

that trees were an essential part of the quality of life in Tampa and an especially important part of the beauty of her own neighborhood.

Chelsea Johnson quickly responded to the alerts she heard about the gutting of Tampa’s tree code, and she managed to stop this proposal in its tracks. She soon became deeply immersed in efforts to more carefully update and revise Tampa’s tree code, which has been on the books since 1972. She founded the local group Tree Something, Say Something to engage and organize citizens but also to negotiate a practical compromise with the homebuilders pushing to eliminate the tree code. Holding weekly meetings around her dinner table, Johnson has become

the face of tree protection in Tampa.

The value of trees and other urban ecosystems extends far beyond aesthetics of course. Heat is the most deadly weather-related killer. Trees reduce the urban heat-island effect, lower cooling costs, provide wildlife habitat, absorb climate-changing carbon dioxide, reduce flooding and help recharge groundwater. They are just one of the many ecosystem services that natural environments can provide in cities, usually at no cost to taxpayers. Recognizing their importance, many cities are putting nature back to work and making natural systems a high priority in urban design and planning. And they are recognizing the essential life-enhancing value of nature and its

role in creating meaningful and flourishing lives.

For Chelsea Johnson that meant working to find a reasonable compromise that would allow for the protection of trees but also some development flexibility. She started convening weekly discussions with developers and environmentalists around her dining room table that eventually led to a new ordinance, adopted by the Tampa City Council in April of 2019. It is a story that shows the power of grassroots activism, the benefits of bringing sometimes warring community factions around a table, and the enduring power that trees and other forms of nature have to deeply enhance the quality of our lives.

The rest of the story is not so optimistic. Some weeks later the conservative-leaning Florida state legislature adopted a law that included a prohibition of local tree protection laws such as Tampa’s. It seems immensely undemocratic, that distant legislators can overturn the animated will of local residents to create the kind of community they wish, but it illustrates the kinds of obstacles faced in protecting local nature and in advancing biophilic cities in the US and around the world.

A similar twist to this tree story can be found in recent months in Toronto. I spoke with Brian Brisbin, a biophilic-oriented architect who has designed a new kind of forest tower. There is more detail in the lead story below, but he and his urban forestry advocates see such



Tampa, Florida
Photo Credit: Michael Cutillo

towers as an essential element in reaching that city’s tree canopy and climate goals. The first of these forested towers—a project called Designers Walk—has recently been approved, but only after months of opposition from the city. Indeed, as Brisbin explained, the high-rise tower became something the residents’ association strongly supported, actively pushing the project’s approval. This is interesting and unusual given the typical NIMBYism that prevails.

“We’re excited, we’re approved, we’re going forward,” Brisbin told me this summer. It is a structure that, if the renderings are any reasonable indication, will deliver new forms of nature not just to residents but to the surrounding community. Residents will see

“a terraced hillside community of trees,” which is why they have been very adamant in their support of the new development. This project shows clearly that biophilic design is something that can overcome the typical opposition to increased urban density.

One of the most inspiring places where density and nature are both accommodated is Paris, and in June we had the wonderful chance to see the fruition of months of planning by David Maddox and his team of volunteers for the Nature of Cities Summit, a four-day conference, which Biophilic Cities joined as a sponsoring organization. It was unlike any conference I have been to, with plenary keynotes replaced with conversations and dialogue.

There was an emphasis on the many ways of understanding and appreciating nature—from poetry and literature readings to art and music. It was an intensely interactive and participatory conference, with every smaller session an opportunity to work together on something. On one day, I found myself tracing a poplar leaf onto a large wall-sized mosaic (a leaf I had brought from Virginia) helping to draw a kind of global tree of life.

Biophilic Cities had a hand in organizing several workshops including one focused on the Biophilic Cities Network and another around the idea of Blue Urbanism, how coastal cities can begin to better connect with the marine world around them. One of the things that makes a meeting like this so exhilarating is the appreciation that there are many other people and organizations working on behalf of urban nature: from NYC Nature Goals 2050 in New York City to the National Park City vision

embraced by London to efforts at creating greenspaces and parks in Mumbai and Shanghai (among many other efforts in many other cities).

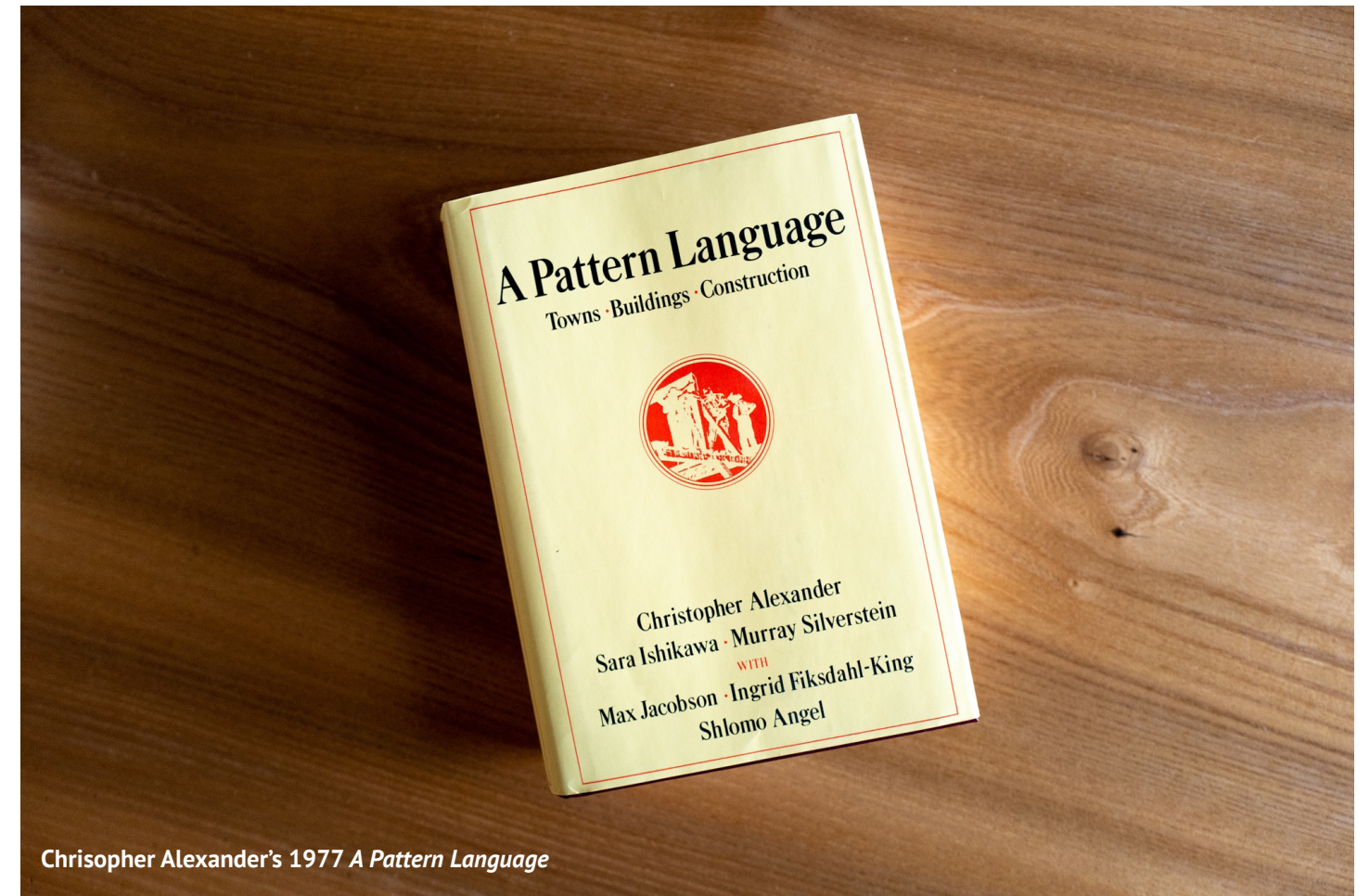
Spending time in Paris is always a joy and always inspiring. The city continues to push the needle announcing several new initiatives to bring more nature into the center. Paris has admirably engaged the public in this process of growing more nature in the city, including planting trees. One particularly striking method is to create a sort of raised bed planting box around the base of trees, something I have been calling a “Tree Garden.” The garden usually includes the names of one or more Parisians who have agreed to take on the duty of caring for these trees and plants.

On another day, I happened to witness a street spectacle that to me was a bit of an epiphany. As I walked along one street, on my way from hotel to conference, there seemed to be something of a commotion ahead, as people were hurriedly and excitedly grabbing small plants from a tall rolling platform. Sedums and many other kinds of plants were, I learned, being given away that day for free. These hundreds of plants had been left over from a recent plant sale, and were being snatched up mightily fast and with remarkable energy and enthusiasm.

I came away thinking to myself how a city might similarly create a plant give-away and how cost-effective it would be to invest in a few hundred (or a



Plant Giveaway in Paris, France
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley



Christopher Alexander's 1977 *A Pattern Language*

few thousand) of plants. Could we even imagine that one of the legitimate and important functions of a municipal government might be to grow and distribute plants to those residents needing or wanting them--the benefits in enhancing mood, cognition, and reducing stress, suggest that it would be a strategy that would deliver a high ratio of value-to-cost and would be one small element of response to growing levels of depression and anxiety. I found out later that the plants being given away were leftovers from an interesting initiative called *Plantes Pour Tous* (Plants for All), started by a couple of landscape gardeners who saw the need to grow and sell houseplants inexpensively, something they now do on multiple weekends

each year in some 14 cities in France (at what they call [Grande Ventes](#), or Big Sales). On that day on a street in Paris, I found myself equally engulfed in this botanical excitement and did myself take a plant. I carried it carefully the several miles to the conference venue where it become a part of the official (and meager) greenery there.

My time wandering around Paris helped solidify an interest in more systematically exploring the unique and special expressions of nature that exist in every city—the special ways that nature emerges or manifests and the particular ideas a city or a neighborhood pursues to bring that nature to life. Inspired by Christopher Alexander's groundbreaking

1977 book, *A Pattern Language*, we have embarked on a journey to unearth and share global biophilic city nature patterns.

I became acquainted with the power of *Pattern Language* back in graduate planning school at the University of Oregon, where for a time I worked on a housing study for the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. I discovered Alexander's book in the UO library, and his idea seemed well-suited as a framework for exploring different housing ideas and policies.

Others have been equally inspired by the idea of *Pattern Language*. We now have the wonderful (and wonderfully useful) set of [14 Patterns of Biophilic Design](#) from Bill

Browning and Terrapin Bright Green. Other colleagues, including Professor Phillip Tabb of Texas A&M have been discerning and writing about the biophilic patterns uncovered in particular places, such as the community of Serenbe, near Atlanta, Georgia, which is the location of the annual Biophilic Leadership Summit that Biophilic Cities co-hosts. Finally, there is Peter Kahn and his colleagues at the University of Washington, who have been equally inspired by Alexander, working to capture lost experiences of nature, patterns they refer to as [A Nature Language](#).

Building on this wonderful work we have recently launched a new initiative to generate and publish online our own set of Biophilic City Patterns. Our effort will hopefully lead to a kind of crowd-sourced global pattern book. It will at once provide inspiration, demonstrate the value and reach of biophilic cities, and share practical ideas for how a city can become more natureful. We have developed a simple template for preparing (including naming, describing, illustrating) a candidate pattern, which will allow the submittal of unique and repeating patterns from partner cities around the world.

As the Biophilic Cities Network continues to grow, we will continue to explore the creative ways we can share insights and ideas and tell the stories of what cities around the world are doing. We continue to tell these stories through filmmaking, for example, and there are now

several additional short films on our web page since my last writing. Several of these focus on inspiring stories of efforts to protect and celebrate bird life in cities, including efforts in Atlanta to make that city more bird-friendly. September saw the publication of a groundbreaking study by researchers at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, documenting a shocking decline in the number of birds in North America. Compared to 1970, there are an astounding 3 billion fewer birds found in North America, representing a nearly 30% decline. It is a depressing study but perhaps a clarion call for cities to step forward in all ways possible to reduce the hazards and expand the habitats available to birds. Profiling the remarkable work being done in cities such as Portland, Phoenix and Atlanta, is one positive step in the direction of showing what is possible.

As we approach 2020, we hope to expand further these efforts at sharing stories, but also to expand the tools available to cities. We hope as well to continue to expand the number of participants in our Network—individuals and organizations as well as city governments. The citizenry and civil society of biophilic cities will, we believe, be as important, perhaps more so, than official structures of city governance. It will ultimately depend on people like Chelsea Johnson, who see the chance to make a difference for nature in their communities, and who step forward, even at great personal cost and sacrifice (especially of time). There will likely always be

unforeseen obstacles—for Tampa a recalcitrant state legislature that sees little need for trees or for the local self-determination to preserve them—but it will ultimately be the force of will and the commitment to a natureful city that such individuals and groups exhibit that will turn the tide.

Resources:

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Heather Stimmler (Feb. 4, 2019). *Inexpensive Houseplants by Plantes Pour Tous*. *Secrets of Paris*. <http://www.secretsofparis.com/heathers-secret-blog/inexpensive-houseplants-by-plantes-pour-tous.html>.



Nature of Cities Summit
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley