



Interview with Paul Bogard on *The Ground Beneath Us* By JD Brown

Paul Bogard, author and associate professor of English at James Madison University has published a new book entitled *The Ground Beneath Us: From the Oldest Cities to the Last Wilderness, What Dirt Tells Us About Who We Are*.

Tim Beatley and JD Brown had an opportunity to sit down with Paul to discuss his new book and his continuing quest to understand and explain for others why we need to hold fast to deep physical and spiritual connections with the natural world.

Every time I talk with Paul Bogard, I come away inspired to try harder to keep my senses open to the world around me and to deepen my relationship with the natural world and the cleansing, enlivening feeling that results.

Paul's prior book *The End of Night* reintroduced me to the nighttime sky. Without conscious realization, the lack of visibility of the night sky had become merely a fact of life. *The End of Night* asks whether it has to be that way and what we are losing when we can no longer experience the nighttime sky. These questions kindled a strong desire in me to search for those dark skies and to appreciate them with the appropriate awe when I find them. It has given me a new added dimension to my vision of the world at night.

With *The Ground Beneath Us*, Paul is creating that same connection with the solid living ground under me. It makes me question how much connection I have with the contours of the real earth. As with the night sky, I am seeking to connect with the ground under my feet and to cherish the moments when I can make a bond with the living foundation of my local environment.

Piece by piece Paul is connecting me to the earth in an authentic physical and human way. As Paul indicates at the close of *The Ground Beneath Us*: "I believe that intimacy can be learned and practiced. That we have a history that need not define us. That we have the opportunity – and maybe more important, the instinct – to cultivate our connections with the life around us."

Here are some excerpts from our recent conversation with Paul about his new book *The Ground Beneath Us*.

Tim Beatley: So, this was wonderful to see in print. It's really remarkable, but also quite a bit different from the last book where you looked above you. Now you're looking below. How does *The End of Night* lead to this book and is there a common connection between looking above and looking below?

Paul Bogard: There is definitely a connection. In both books, I'm really interested in the benefits of our connection with the natural world and the costs of our separation from the natural world. In *The End of Night*, I'm basically talking about that in terms of being separated from the darkness of the night sky by artificial light. And in this book I'm talking about it in terms of being literally separated from the natural ground by pavement. As well as being separated from the ground by our mindset, our thinking that we are separated from the ground by spending most of our time inside. Both of those literal separations have consequences. I was equally interested in how that literal separation symbolizes our more metaphorical separation from the ground. Other grounds that give us our food, our water, our energy, and even our spirit.

I think both books are very similar in terms of the themes and the messages that I'm concerned about. So many of the problems that we're dealing with in cities, but also in society in general, come from this lack of connection with the natural world and a mindset that we think we can exist, and that we do exist, as a separate entity from nature. I'm fascinated by that and obviously troubled by that and trying to, through my stories, comment on it.

JD Brown: At the beginning of the book, you start with the cities and urbanized areas where there is a particular disconnect. There is a physical disconnect but also a lack of equal access. You talk about that in the context of Mexico City and use the phrase "biological poverty," which is a really powerful phrase.

Paul Bogard: That comes from a report that I found where the author was talking about people in cities living in areas of biological poverty with a particular effect on children. Where people are growing up with no exposure to wild land and have no idea about the biological richness that the world usually offers. So many people grow up in urban areas and do not have access to a world beyond what they see. They don't know that there could be something else.

Tim Beatley: Were there stories from cities that you discovered in your studies that you find particularly inspiring in terms of thinking about the future? I recall us having some discussions about "depaving" initiatives where hard surfaces are taken up and a connection to the soil is restored.

Paul Bogard: There is an organization in Portland, Oregon, called [Depave](#). What I found is that yes we can depave, we can pull up pavement to reveal what's underneath. But when you pave over ground, you kill the life in the ground. The process is expensive and you have to bring in soil to replenish what was lost. I suppose it could be done, but it just didn't seem possible on more than a limited scale. It seems like it's so much easier to protect what you have and not lose it, than it is to try to bring back what you have lost.

Tim Beatley: Are there models of cities or places where you can still walk, maybe even take your shoes off, and have a physical connection to soil and what's beneath us?

Paul Bogard: Yeah, I think there are. I could have written a lot more about the immense value of city parks. I live in Minneapolis, which has a park system that's been ranked year after year as the number one park system in the country. Our house is right on one of the parkways and so I can walk out my front door, walk across a twelve foot single lane paved parkway onto a grassy median. It's just that easy and there are

parks and lakes all over. The difference that it makes in terms of quality of life is important. I don't know how many people consciously think about it, but to me that experience seems so invaluable. I tried to take my shoes off and walk wherever I went in the book.

Tim Beatley: It takes a little change of attitude too. We take off our shoes as we go into houses but then we put them on as we go out the door. It's a mental choice.

Paul Bogard: Central park is a place that I can think of right off the bat, where you see that people have their shoes off and are surrounded by the skyscrapers. That's a pretty neat juxtaposition.

Tim Beatley: I wonder if that's another one of our biophilic indicators of a good city. Somewhere you can take your shoes off.

Making the connection back to the first book, have we made any progress on the night sky front? The book did resonate with a huge audience.

Paul Bogard: There's a lot more awareness of the issue. There are a lot more places that are wanting to take action. I regularly get emails from people who are reading the book or from high school students who are studying light pollution. Some of the people who've been active on this issue for twenty-five or thirty years tell me that when they first started talking about it, people had never heard those two words together: light and pollution. And now I'll ask an audience: how many of you have heard of light pollution? And the majority of the hands go up.

Tim Beatley: A little bit different than what you're talking about in terms of connecting to soil, but there is a whole kind of world in cities underneath our feet. From a city planning point of view, I wonder what we can make of that. Is there potential for us to be using spaces underneath the ground?



Alaska Tundra

THE GROUND BENEATH US



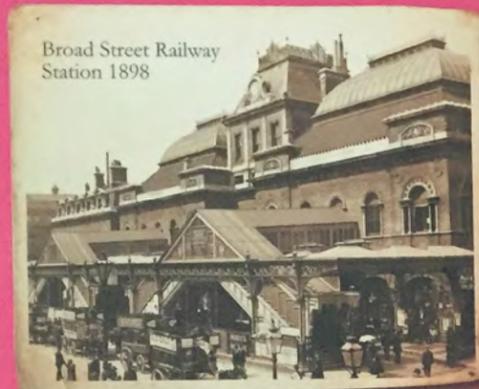
From the Oldest Cities to the Last Wilderness,
What Dirt Tells Us About Who We Are

PAUL BOGARD





ARCHAEOLOGY AT LIVERPOOL STREET



Crossrail is undertaking one of the most extensive archaeological programmes in the UK.

There are 2000 years of history buried beneath your feet including the foundations of Broad Street railway station; the former Bedlam burial ground; Moorfields marsh; a Roman road and the Walbrook, one of London's lost rivers.

Below are some of the archaeological artefacts that have been found here at Liverpool Street.

Victorian Structure

Victorian sewers and foundations of the 19th century arches of Broad Street station.



1.5 metres

Bedlam Burial Grounds

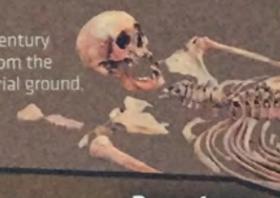


The burial ground on Ogilby and Morgan's map of London in 1676.



Headstone of Mary Godfree, who died during the Great Plague.

16th/17th century skeleton from the Bedlam burial ground.



3 metres

Medieval Moorfields Marsh



Medieval bone ice skates. Londoners took to the ice when Moorfields froze over in winter.



A Medieval scene of ice skating, painted by Esaias van de Velde.

4 metres

Roman Suburbs



The largest collection of horse shoes found in London.



1st and 2nd century Roman bracelet and spoon.



Skull and cremation urn suggest different burial practices in this area.



6 metres

6 metres

This question of subterranean spaces came up in the context of Singapore because they have a limited amount of space and are a growing vertical city. There is an interest in figuring out how to do things in a subterranean way. Also in other, northern cities like Toronto that have undergrounds and even parts of northern Virginia in metro stations with entire shopping areas. Subterranean options provide a kind of spatial planning, an efficient use of urban space that might be promising.

Paul Bogard: I don't think we're paying much attention to what's under our feet and that's true in cities as well. There probably is a potential there that is unrealized.

In the first part of the book, I describe my experience in London, where they are digging a trench for underground rail. The project designers told me that in London there has been human settlement for almost as long as any place on earth. But they said that if you go thirty feet down all evidence of human activity disappears. As one guy said, "the party's over," we're not there. I think that's representative of what we're talking about here, that our consciousness and our literal presence just doesn't go down very far beneath the ground.

Again, in London, they found a woman's skeleton lying beneath the ground, holding her favorite plate on her chest. She's been there for 300 years and it's right under a subway stop where millions of people have walked over the ground. It's representative of just how completely oblivious we are about what lies beneath us.

Tim Beatley: What do we do about that? We need more parks and we need to maintain that connection to soil. But is there a more holistic way that we ought to be educating about nature or the environment that includes more than the birds and trees at ground level and above? Do we need something new?

Paul Bogard: I think so. I really am struck by the value of soil. It's so important that we understand how important it is and not pave it over and maintain an opportunity for people to access the soil. I'm thinking of little kids being able to dig in the dirt. Kids love digging and in general people like digging too. They like that sense of exploration. So can we maintain a place that where they can do that?

Tim Beatley: Diggable spaces. Diggable parks.

Paul Bogard: Exactly.

JD Brown: At the end of the book, you highlight a quote and a single word from Thoreau: "daily." This is a word that appears in Tim's concept of the nature pyramid. At Biophilic Cities, we talk about the need to provide opportunities for daily interactions with nature. In The Ground Beneath Us, you talk about re-establishing that connection through practice and experience. How do we maintain a daily practice and experience with nature in urban areas?

Paul Bogard: I love that quote from Thoreau. I'm interested in the fact that while he is out in wilderness and having a completely different experience, it still relates to the urban world now. He's saying how amazing it is that we have this opportunity daily to be shown this world.

Tim Beatley: "Daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it." Beautiful. So the last chapter is home. Let's circle back to what that means? Is it your home? Home in a broader way? Our collective home?

Paul Bogard: Yes. All of those, all of the above. In the chapter, I do go back to Minneapolis and talk about that. I talk about burying my dog, which is a starting point for the story. Before that I talk about the idea of sacred ground as ground that puts us in touch with or makes us aware of the connections that keep us alive, whether they're human connections or connections with nature. The most important place for us to go is home. The most important place for us to understand the sacred is our home. Wherever we call home is where we need to make these connections. The misconception for people living in cities is that as long as there's wilderness out west, we can do whatever we want to here in cities. I want to say: here's the most important place. Wherever here is, whatever you do here, it is the most important place.

Tim Beatley: I did want to ask you about what you're writing now and what's your next project? Where do you go from the sky and underneath your feet? Is there a middle ground somewhere?

Paul Bogard: I am really hoping to write a story about trying to balance my excitement about becoming a father for the first time with my fear, sadness, and anxiety about what's happening to my beloved world. I'm really interested in the human mind and spirit right now. So maybe if we looked up, we looked down, now we would be looking in. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors are starting to sound the alarm about the impact of environmental change in general, and climate change specifically, on our minds and spirits in terms of depression and anxiety.

You have people talking about acute trauma from storms and a sort of a chronic trauma from just seeing change around you every day. I think I say it in *The End of Night*, but you could be sad all the time if you wanted to. And nobody wants to live that way. So how do you stay engaged and not be sad all the time?

I want to write about the emotion "solastalgia," a term from an Australian writer, meaning to miss the place where you still live because it's changing even if you haven't gone anywhere.

I wrote about it in *In The End of Night* and every time I read that section people wanted to hear more. It really resonates with people who've lived somewhere and are seeing it change. I had been thinking about that for a year and then we got pregnant and it had new meaning for me. I'm struck by that longing for the solace that we used to feel in a place. I'm really fascinated by the anticipation of having a child and how I negotiate the joy and the sorrow at the same time.

Tim Beatley: It's hard. But I guess I focus on the positive. I have a daughter who's now a senior in high school, which is astounding to me, but she's into photography. She likes taking photographs of the sky. About a month ago, we went up to the upper Shenandoah National Park in the dead of night. And it's actually not a bad dark sky moment. You get a little bit outside the city and you see the Milky Way. She took wonderful photographs. So there is a positive, a wondrous aspect to having children when you are able to share together things like that.

Paul Bogard: A big piece for me is saying that this feeling of solastalgia is important. That sadness or anxiety about this is totally natural and it's in many ways a good thing. It's the same thing with talking about darkness in *The End of Night*. Darkness is good and is a normal part of being alive. Feeling sad about what's happening is the start of the question. What can we do, what do we do? There's a notion in America that we are supposed to be happy all the time and that if we allow ourselves to be sad that's all we will feel. We're capable of so much more than that.



View of New York skyline



Underground railway excavation in London