

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

This is a story about innovative service to people, places, and nature through physical, intellectual and emotional journeys, with lessons learned along the way. As an environmental designer and landscape architect, I strive to create connections and possibilities, insights, and empowerment, in small ways creating a better future for my clients and myself. This story is directed toward those also aspiring to create a better future by design, students or career changers in formal design professions or independent searchers, and those seeking such services.

“Standard approaches are not working. All professions are specializing and losing touch with reality. Become a generalist, think holistically, invent a new approach. Don’t ask for permission, just do it.”¹ Grant R. Jones

Why is innovation important? Stasis brings rigidity. Static professional fields and cultures tend toward regulated conformity, meaningless novelty, and obsolescence. Our rapidly changing technologies, societies and climate bring peril and opportunity, especially to underserved people, places and nature threatened by over-consumption, unsustainable development, mass migration and resulting conflict. Insightful, resilient pioneers emerge during times of challenge and change and, if guided by ethics, ecology and respect, can empower beneficiaries, while earning personal satisfaction.

As a student of landscape architecture in the 1960’s, I witnessed my profession emerging beyond park and estate garden design revolutionized by Fredric Law Olmsted during a time of great change and chance a century earlier. Exploiting opportunities in emerging fields, landscape architects revolutionized remote sensing, ecologically based regional and watershed planning and wildlife corridors, visual resource management, and wellness gardens, as a few examples. When I began studies in zoo design soon after, the field was controlled by popular zoo personalities directing non-specialist architects and engineers. Zoos were judged on collection size rather than animal wellbeing. Today, thanks to the efforts of myself and my colleagues described in Chapter Seven, this design field is largely led by landscape architects and joint landscape and architectural practices, with wildlife research and zoo biology advisors, at least in North America. Today, animal well-being has become the dominant concern in the best zoos globally.

Results are more important than credentials in changing fields. My entry into publishing in scientific journals without any scientific background was possible because the field of zoo biology was new and expanding. Innovations I helped to develop in housing for elderly, disabled and poor economic migrants in Canada, Brazil, and subsistence

¹ Jones, Grant R. VOICES of the EARTH, Talking with Rivers, Mountains and Animals. Listening to Trees and Each Other. An Autobiographical Narrative with Stories, Poems and Drawings. Design Primer from an American Landscape Architect. Page 261. In press.

2. Ibid

farmers in Afghan mountain villages, were made possible by working in under-regulated fields. If, like me, you are drawn to global transformative innovation, read on.

Looking back over a long active career, I can see several useful patterns. For one, I have always wanted to be different. Many understandably seek safety and comfort in professional and social communities by fitting in. My urge, perhaps originating in family history as edge people, was to rebel against conformity in thought and fashion and especially to avoid being forced into standard norms. I resisted being boxed in by limiting descriptions, restrictions, predictions and expectations. From this evolved my guiding admonition: *“Build bridges and not boxes!”*

Bridges are portals to other worlds and views, dangers and delights. Lately I have expanded this bridge building metaphor to think of bridges as means to “connect the dots” and discover unique insights. They are pathways to collaborative opportunities and hybrid ideas between and among siloed tribes and cultures. They are passages and journeys. Travel, especially international travel, can be seen as both a bridge to and passage between and among different geographies, landscapes, languages, cultures. One meets amazing individuals and landscapes. When seen from below, bridges form portals for boats, trains, roads and thoughts, perhaps a means to escape polarized choices by opening an unseen third journey.



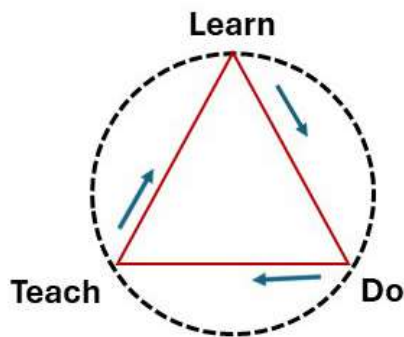
During one of my visits to China I had a chop (a carved stamp used as a signature) made from my name. The artist listened to my name, “Coe Jon,” surname first in the Asian manner, and translated the sounds as he heard them to “Ko Qian En.” These words, he said, were like the Mandarin words for “bridge” and “portal.” Perhaps one way my story can be told is as a series of journeys over many bridges and through many portals and passages, exploring the science and art of environmental design. Perhaps this tale will encourage others to bridge barriers, find fruitful passages and improve the future.

Another characteristic I have found in myself is a level of perfectionism, resulting in the self-admonition: *“Exceed expectations!”* When I exceed my own expected resources in energy, time, knowledge or skill, perhaps working all night in the “zone” or the “flow”, I will likely exceed the client’s expectations as well. This results in personal satisfaction, no matter what the final project outcome. Several of the project experiences I will describe exemplify this and if you find this characteristic congenial, read on.

Empathy, an emotional sensation, is an important motivator and focuser, helping one to see and connect. It leads to a fourth personal characteristic I learned from my father, the outward manifestation of empathy, which is respect. Respect for beauty, utility and resilience. Respect for authentic, knowledgeable, and wise people, for their intellectual and emotional depth, whatever their station. Respect for plants, animals, geology, geography, climate and their networked interactions we call nature. Respect for ancient cultures and climate-grounded vernaculars supported by useful innovation. Respect for the numinous and transcendent and respect for fragility. Good ideas and inspiration are

often found in unexpected places, when we listen and see. Later I will relate examples of unassuming yet extraordinary people and places. May such a path interest you? Read on.

On a practice level my professional mission evolved to become “*collaboration in the design of sustainable and delightful habitats for people, plants, and animals.*” Learning landscape architecture and environmental planning, both at university and in early practice, was basecamp for skills development and vision enlargement. There I learned from inspiring specialists in art, design, illustration, communication, horticulture, soils, entomology, site engineering, architecture, ecology, geography, and psychology to name interrelated fields. I also challenged elitist demagoguery. On my outward passage I became both specialist and generalist. Work ranged from detailed writing and illustration for zoological and botanical garden interpretative signs to innovating animal and botanical habitats and management systems, to planning communities and city, regional and national parks. My fascination with vernacular and ecological diversity resulted in journeys of discovery and service in forty-five countries, with active projects in fifteen on six continents, and residence in five nations. Experiences gained through this diversity of subjects and places strengthened my ability to recognize patterns of convergence and symbiosis; to envision and form bridges to opportunities hidden to others, to innovate.



In about 2016, I was collaborating with long-time friend and then client Mr. Andrew Scanlon, then head of the United Nations Environment Programme in Afghanistan. Andrew is a deep thinker, interested in the ethos and philosophy of work and service from an ecological perspective. One observation we developed was the idea of life as a virtuous cycle of **learning, doing, teaching and repeat**. I diagrammed this as an equilateral triangle within a circle with the learning-doing-teaching represented by the points of the triangle and

the repeating of these stages, the cycles through the three stages, represented by the circle. But since these cycles occur through the fourth dimension of time, a spiral would be a better representation, although more difficult to diagram. This is still a great oversimplification. **Learning**, reading a book, going to a lecture or into the field or traveling to unfamiliar places are also forms of doing. **Doing** is a form of learning framed by the saying “learn by doing.” **Teachers** are continuously learning how and what to teach. So, at one scale learning-doing-teaching can blend simultaneously. On an intermediate scale, a design or planning project involves **learning** about the project site, its opportunities and constraints, the client’s and other stakeholders’ needs, ambitions, and resources and about the philosophies, arts, and technologies available to advance the clients’ vision and satisfaction. **Doing** is represented by the undertaking of the design, construction, and commissioning processes. **Teaching** can be represented by reporting and publishing findings and lessons learned.

This memoir follows this general formula although each life stage also contains this cycle. For example, as a student I was keen to both learn and help other students learn. While the chronology of events and experiences described is important in describing a life's work, it is secondary to the context, subject areas and values of the events described. Organizing my tale by subject areas allows readers the choice of following the tale as presented or selectively engaging in subjects of greatest value or interest to them.

- **Chapter two - Foundations and Formative Years**, recalls early life-shaping experiences.
- **Chapter Three - Learning from and with people** describes my university student experiences and later, my experiences as a professor and faculty member.
- **Chapter Four - Learning from the land**, chronicles international travel, both for research and for pleasure, which greatly informed my work.
- **Chapter Five – Designing for people**, is about national and international work where both landscape and culture are essential features.
- **Chapter Six – Designing for the land**, chronicles international work planning and protecting natural areas including national parks.
- **Chapter Seven – Designing with People, Plants and Animals**, recalls experiences designing zoos and botanical gardens in seven countries.
- **Chapter Eight – Planning and design with land, people and culture** includes some previous themes, but focuses on the profound influence of unique landscapes, cultures and colleagues.
- **Chapter Nine Learning with Family and Colleagues** includes homelife adventures with frequent moving and resettlement in four countries and the colleagues, challenges and delights of life in professional design offices and on the road.
- **Chapter Ten - Lessons Learned**, shares what I've come to find important and rewarding.
- **Appendices** include a listing of publications, lectures, honors and awards and a chronological outline of subjects.

My body of work includes well over one hundred-sixty planning and design projects completed for nearly one hundred different clients and traveling in forty-five countries on six continents. I have selected those that in my opinion are most innovative, interesting, informative, and rewarding. If friends and colleagues do not find projects they had a hand in, I apologize. I also describe selected travel experiences and adventures, included because of the inter-applicability of travel (learning) and practice (doing and teaching).

Now, in my fourth year, I still study, observe, learn and do, providing pro bono services to worthy undertakings. My emphasis now is teaching through writing, lecturing and

informal mentoring – sharing ideas, insights and experiences. Developing this book is an extension of this work.

Who will read this narration? My work is best known in the specialized field of zoo design. I have collaborated on award-winning zoo projects and frequently receive queries from students seeking entry into this specialized field. I am also contacted by journalists seeking a deeper understanding of events and trends in zoo practice. I have a smaller academic following from my publications on zoo design, animal welfare theory and practice. I have done much broader work, if less well known, as this journal describes. My journey began with the profession of landscape architecture. Other careers may better suit readers, proceeding where passion, need and opportunity lead. Perhaps a global audience of generalist environmental architects, landscape architects, engineers, and planners, as well as those teaching and seeking such services will find value here.

