DESIGNING INDIGENOUS LANDSCAPES:
ARCHITECT JULIA WATSON

By Richard J. Blaustein

To Australian-born landscape architect Julia Watson, the sacred and the ecologically-rich go hand-in hand. It is a point Watson repeats in the attic-like room on the sixth floor of Columbia University’s Avery Hall, the architecture building, where she teaches “Living Landscape Eco-Technologies” for graduate students during the spring semester. In this class Watson explains that indigenous peoples often have their sacred sites at places that flourish with many species and bountiful natural resources, such as springs and waterfalls. It makes sense: where there are clear waters, winds that disperse seeds, seasonal animal migrations, or even solitary mountains that provide a marker and safe haven for a people, the rich ecology at these sites would instigate feelings of thankfulness, protection, or tranquility that people associate with the spiritual.

Watson also has her own design firm, Studio Rede (http://studiorede.com) to which she recently added Project Rede, the digital and informational wing of her firm, At Studio Rede, among her projects, Watson works with indigenous peoples who are rethinking how to manage their landscapes and sacred sites. Some of these places are United Nations World Heritage sites.

Being attuned to the rights and culture of Native peoples is very important, according to Watson, because in the end, her work is about supporting their rightful claims to land, culture, and the future. As a landscape architect, Watson envisions that increasingly the designer will bring skills to help native communities maintain biodiversity, functioning ecosystems, and sacred sites—all part of the rhythms, folklore, and productivity of indigenous peoples. Indeed, she sees that working with indigenous peoples, the designer can help restore and replenish biodiversity and ecosystem services to sacred sites and ancestral lands.

Learning about this has been very personal, Watson recounts. She traces it back to when she was eleven years old and her family travelled from Australia to vacation at Yosemite National Park. “Yosemite was my first experience with a really monumental scale landscape, and also it was the first sacred site I had ever been to,” explains Watson. “I did not know it at the time, but I think inherently there is something about that landscape even as a child you can recognize.”

On one day Watson and her family were having lunch at Yosemite’s Ahwahnee Hotel, where the windows opened to the outdoor landscape. She saw deer grazing outside: “I walked out and walked straight out to the deer, a deer with her fawn. I actually started to feed them, and at the time I had this incredibly close experience with a large wild mammal that had a huge impact on me,” recounts Watson. “But then after about five minutes of doing this, suddenly I had a woman yelling at me saying get away from the deer.”

Later on the trip, she learned that the woman was not being unreasonable because a couple of children were recently trampled by deer that were aggressive in looking after their fawns. The incident is still very vivid.
for Watson. She recalls it as “a really amazing dream-like sequence of having this close encounter with nature in a natural environment and it immediately being reversed—’be careful! be cautious! be wary! You are not supposed to be near this type of nature!’” With the passage of time, Watson is able to philosophize over the incident, and she reflects that her peaceful feeding of the deer and the sudden scolding she received were like “the two ends in the spectrum,” with an inviting nature at one end and some kind of human separation from the whole of it on the other.

According to Watson, the lessons of her Yosemite trip still resonate and shape her approach to architecture and design. The first lesson was the human need for an intermediary between themselves and nature. Native cultures often have shamans or wise elders who interpret nature. “We really do need these people interpreting, integrating within that interaction,” explains Watson. “As a designer existing in that space, that is kind of your territory.” And Watson emphasizes that the Native peoples are whom the designer serves in a true spirit of collaboration.

In addition to her work supporting Native peoples with their rights and maintenance of heritage, Watson also feels that design and architecture will extend an appreciation for this indigenous peoples’ understanding of “what it is in nature that is really interesting, what a sacred space is…and also about respect for it.”

Years after her childhood trip, when Watson was a landscape architecture graduate student at Harvard, she took a course on sacred sites, and her teacher assigned the research topic of a “contested site.” She was drawn again to Yosemite National Park, but this time to focus on how the Native American Ahwahneechee, who resided for centuries at Yosemite, were evicted from their beloved landscape.

Watson describes the four-thousand-year presence of Native Americans at Yosemite as an “overlay” of history and stewardship upon the Yosemite landscape. She feels it is unfortunate that she has no remembrance of learning about indigenous culture at Yosemite during her childhood trip, and she partially attributes this to Frederick Law Olmstead, famed landscape architect who drew the charter for Yosemite National Park. “If Olmstead had considered the cultural overlay of the Native American that could have been an important educational site in understanding Native American populations and their relationship with nature and not just conservationists’ relationship with nature,” Watson says. “I think Olmstead seminal-ly did not recognize that as an opportunity and something that needed to be evolved and managed in coincidence with the idea of management of nature.”

Watson has tried to draw lessons from Olmstead’s omission and apply them to her own work in many places throughout the world. Supported by Harvard’s Charles Eliot Traveling Fellowship in Landscape Architecture, she has visited sacred sites on different continents, offering governments and indigenous peoples her recommendations for how design can better support the Native peoples’ connection to and management of these sacred places. The fellowship travel has synergized with her Studio Rede work. “Rede is not just about conservation of landscapes,” Watson explains. “Rede is very much about preserving culture and cultural diversity and heritage. Because once culture is gone, knowledge is gone.”

On being awarded the Eliot fellowship, one early priority visit for Watson was to go back to her native Australia and at last visit Uluru. Uluru, known to many as Ayers Rock, is sacred to a few Australian indigenous peoples, and is now managed jointly by Anangu indigenous people and the Australian government.

Watson went to Uluru and worked on how to stop recreational climbing there. For the Anangu, scaling Uluru is desecration of a place of origins and shows disrespect for their ancestor worship. However, the Australian government has gained revenue from the climbers and would not allow indigenous representatives to stop the climbing.
Watson studied the site and worked with the Anangu in creating a computerized virtual experience that also includes visits to other religious sites in the area. According to Watson, the virtual visit would “simulate an experience of walking over the rock and while you are going through that experience being told about all the knowledge and also being explained [having it explained to you] why you can’t do this.” She adds, “And so that would be a means of education, management, and prevention for people doing things that were deemed de-sanctifying or [to be] polluting a sacred place.”

Watson thought that perhaps this proposal would win over the Anangu representatives on the Uluru management leadership and gain for the Anangu leverage to get the Australian government to stop the climbs. While she did receive support from the young people, the older Anangu were not convinced. “When it went to the elders, they said no, it is against sacred lore to virtualize [this ] space.”

Nonetheless, Watson has no hurt feelings about the Uluru experience. She reflects that at the time she was working as a sole practitioner, without the support of others, such as anthropologists, who were knowledgeable of local customs and lore.

More recently, in Bali, Watson has teamed up with those supportive collaborators, including anthropologist Steve Lansing of The Stockholm Resilience Center and co-founder of The Complexity Institute of Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University. In Bali Watson has worked on a detailed proposal to conserve the Subak, the thousand-year-old terraced rice patties that are linked to Bali’s tripartite Tribuana “sacred cosmology.” In this combined cosmology-topography, at the top of the mountainous landscape is the Swah, the holiest spiritual level, which corresponds to the area of the crater from which flow the nutrients that enrich the rice patties of the intermediate Bwah, the earthly region. At the level of the coast, where all is washed away—and where all the waste is—is the Bhur, the profane level. Watson is quick to point out that to the Balinese all three levels are interdependent, all a part of life. “The whole island is sort of sacred space and it all comes back to the ecology,” explains Watson. “You would think that the Swah and Bhur, being opposite, the sacred and the profane, are sort of like bad and good. In the indigenous culture, no thing is bad and another good. For either to exist, the other has to exist. ...To exist both extremes are essential.”

In the 1980s, the Subaks’ ecology became stressed when pesticides were introduced. This ecological stress was later exacerbated by unmanaged tourism, illegal sewage, and conflicts over water use, which were out of keeping with this thousand year culture whose terraced landscapes facilitated water sharing. Being granted a World Heritage status and attracting tourists has not helped with managing the Subak, according to Watson.

Watson’s design welcomes tourism to the Subak, but with visitors carefully routed through low-impact pathways. These low-impact pathways highlight the spiritual sites—for example, the sacred streams parallel to the walkways and other places of heritage such as archaeological remains of early Balinese agriculture. The routes also include museum stops carefully linked to the low-impact walkway. Additionally, Watson envisions some wetlands restoration as part of the plan, both to remediate the legacy of nutrient pollution and to support the local people with traditional livelihoods.
Watson has presented her design for review to the Bali Ministry of Education and Culture, which will have prerogative to implement the design. She also continues to work intensively with Lansing and the Singapore Complexity Institute, currently on a Project Rede digital guide project for religious pilgrimages. Watson will make this guide public this April at the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage in India, which in 2013 involved over 100 million pilgrims. Watson’s work is part of the Kumbh Mela Experiment (http://www.the-kumbh-mela-experiment.com/), a special data-intensive project that seeks to enhance safety for mass pilgrimages. (Also currently as part of Studio Rede, Watson is working with NTU, Nature Iraq, and the longtime inhabitants of the region on a wetland restoration demonstration project in southern Iraq.)

For all sites, Watson returns to that point she makes in class. “When you look at how indigenous people relate to their landscape... the sacredness is really about understanding the knowledge of the ecosystem. The sacredness is innate, and inherent in the sacredness is the conservation of the ecosystem.”

Another theme in the class is that indigenous knowledge also is technological knowledge that can offer benefits and solutions for industrialized societies. “What has been seen as technology and innovation was taken from a small spectrum of countries and known communities... But what we are coming to understand and beginning to acknowledge—in the sciences as well as in landscape architecture—is that when you look at ecological systems there is a whole plethora of innovation that is equally entwined with ecological adaptation that we can learn from and learn how to use in contemporary design.” Green roofs throughout the world, the floating garden islands of Bolivia, and the flexible, permeable dams for fishing of the Enawene nawe of Brazil are examples of green technological design that can inspire design in the future, according to Watson. “In the last ten years architecture and landscape architecture have been obsessed with innovation materials technology,” says Watson. “So if we could look at the large-scale ecosystem management with the materials technology, then I think we are on the brink of a very interesting step.”

Now at the end of the semester, with classes finished, Watson sits and chats in her favorite Greenwich Village park in New York City. In a small redoubt of nature, where birds chirp incessantly and the seeds are lofting about in the air, Watson reflects on how indigenous peoples’ sanctification of the planet can even be brought into our urban daily lives. “In cities these kinds of spaces become sacred. People treasure them because they are rare and because there is a lot of care put into them,” Watson says. “It comes back to the idea that sacredness is really a lens [through which] you look at a space.”

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