

Virtual Sense of Place

Terrain.org and the Online Nexus of Literature and Environment

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The Premise

Whether virtual or actual, what drives strong community and a sustainable nexus between the built and natural environments is sense of place. The purpose of this interactive position statement is to explore sense of place in the context of ecological media — for e-zines like *Terrain.org: A Journal of the Built & Natural Environments* that work at the nexus of literature and environment, and otherwise.

1. What is “sense of place” and what does it have to do with ecological media?

My Story

What does someone with a graduate degree in urban and regional planning and a love for poetry do to bridge those interests? Start a magazine, of course! I founded *Terrain.org: A Journal of the Built & Natural Environments* in 1997 with fellow planning graduate Todd Ziebarth. We hoped, initially, to start a print journal, but without funding or magazine experience, we turned to an internet that hosted very few literary journals at the time.

I have served as editor and web developer ever since, moving the journal (and my family) from Denver to Tucson in 2000. With the move, I transitioned from a role as energy services manager with the U.S. Department of Energy to a web program manager (I now work at the University of Arizona in that capacity).

I also started a small web development business, Ocotillo Design, that is relevant here because of its tagline and scope: *Crafting your virtual sense of place.*

Like a favorite plaza or streetside café, websites should have a sense of place.

They must be elegant in design and aesthetic, usability and browser compatibility, and architecture and content. Indeed, the best websites — those that create a virtual sense of place — inspire and therefore motivate the user....

Sense of place has long been an interest in my physical and digital worlds, not only in the context, for example, of wireless community, but also in the pursuit of great places that integrate the built and natural environments.

Definitions

"Sense of place" is one of those terms cited often but rarely defined. So let's start there:

A big definition, but a pretty good one, really, from *Geography Dictionary*:

Either the intrinsic character of a place, or the meaning people give to it, but, more often, a mixture of both. Some places are distinctive through their physical appearance, like the Old Man of Hoy; others are distinctive, but have value attached to them, like the white cliffs of Dover.

Less striking places have meaning and value attached to them because they are "home," and it is argued that attachment to a place increases with the distinctiveness of that place. Planners use this argument by consciously creating or preserving memorable and singular structures to make a space distinctively different. The Cardiff Bay Development scheme has done this, first by preserving the best of the old buildings, and even relocating one — the Norwegian church. All this is done to encourage in the residents an attachment to that place.

A final element is our own experience of that place; if you had been desperately unhappy in central London, it might be that the sight of Trafalgar Square would reawaken a sense of misery in you.

Cultural geographer J.B. Jackson, in *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, writes:

It is place, permanent position in both the social and topographical sense, that gives us our identity.

Even if we know (or think we know, though I happen to agree) that place gives us our identity, it's still difficult to define sense of place, as John McIlwain, a senior fellow at the Urban Land Institute says in a 2003 *Miami Herald* article by Scott Andron:

Sense of place is like the Supreme Court definition of pornography: You know it when you see it. It's a very old concept that we have lost over the last 50 or 60 years: It's something unique or particular to your location.

A final word on sense of place? Perhaps that of Aldo Leopold and, humbly in his shadow, my own from my essay "The Sum of All Species," published recently in *Mid-American Review*:

"The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: 'What good is it?'" writes Leopold in *Round River*. "If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering."

Yet we must also acknowledge that humans are likewise a critical cog of the system. Though we more often act as a clog, the legitimate community comprises the landscape natural and built, the living and dying species of plants and animals and man, and more. That must be what is meant by *sense of place*. If we truly seek a sense of place, not just an acknowledgement of a locale's unique identity, but an understanding and appreciation of the place and its elements — and I wager that we must — then all of the parts are required. It's not only a matter of who was here first — the standard argument — but also how we are to evolve as a human species. How, instead of living through subtraction, we can exist by addition. Not the multiplication of our own species, but the survival of all species.

Sense of Place as Indicator

If we recognize that sense of place is important to the human (and so the environmental) condition then the next question may be: How is sense of place an indicator for ecological media, which may be defined as mass communications about the environmental (and so the human) condition?

The answer lies both in content and delivery:

Content is the stuff that is delivered. An alienated society, one without much of a sense of place, would likely communicate its alienation both through art and journalism, in its broadest context. In the ecological sense, we might consider indicators, for example, to be doomsday movies where, rather than aliens or corrupt politicians, earth's forces themselves wreak havoc. On the other end of the spectrum, an increase in environmental reporting related to community may also be an indication of the relationship between sense of place.

Delivery is the tool or platform through which the content is made available, and delivery options are multiplying in type and speed-of-access in an exponential manner: websites, video, instant messaging, twittering, cell and satellite phones — on top of traditional (and waning?) methods such as books, newspapers, broadsides, and even good old-fashioned community meetings. Here, sense of place becomes relevant in the aesthetic of the delivery mechanism, certainly, but also in the geographic location of the delivery. With more mobile devices, we can find our sense of place while getting our media fix more easily than ever.

I wonder, though, if that's all backwards. Is sense of place an indicator for ecological media? Perhaps the better question is: Is ecological media an indicator for sense of place? Certainly they're related, but I believe the media itself more directly indicates where we're at, from a sense-of-place perspective.

Of course, there are some pretty cool sustainability and quality-of-life indicators worth investigating, too, such as:

- Sustainable Measures
- Calvert-Henderson Quality of Life Indicators
- Minnesota Milestones
- Check Your Success: A Guide to Developing Indicators for Community-Based Environmental Projects

2. Can virtual sense of place replace actual sense of place? Should it?

Yes

A quick review of the younger generation's hobbies reveals how easy it would be for a virtual sense of place to replace actual sense of place. It's the great possibility, if not the great fear. From video gaming (online and off) to social networking sites such as

Facebook to Second Life — "the internet's largest, user-created 3D virtual world community" —we spend more and more of our time online.

And, you know, we mostly like it. I recall before joining the graduate program in urban and regional planning at the University of Colorado - Denver how much I enjoyed playing SimCity. The game was for me what the movie *Top Gun* was for Navy jet pilot recruits: great inspiration to get into the industry — in my case, urban design and planning. I spent hours on end creating beautiful, efficient, pedestrian-oriented cities (which were then usually destroyed by the program's *War of the Worlds*-like alien, much to my chagrin).

And now, I'm afraid, I've misled you, because at this point you may think I will advocate for virtual sense of place replacing actual sense of place. Alas, I cannot — this is a position "paper," after all, and my position is that we'd be worse off indeed if the virtual succeeded in replacing the actual. Except perhaps in movie theaters. And race car driving. And jury duty.

No

I've argued that virtual sense of place should not replace actual reality, but I have difficulty in claiming that virtual cannot replace actual, for it's happening all around us. There are, of course, inherent risks in technology, something I explore in my essay "Songbird," appearing in a recent issue of *Hawk & Handsaw: The Journal of Creative Sustainability*. In the case of the essay, the technology is the iPod, often called the isolation-Pod, and for good reason:

Beyond the real possibility of hearing loss — listen no more than five minutes at full volume or four-and-a-half hours at seventy percent volume per day, researchers have determined — the broader risk is disconnection from landscape and community altogether. Video game developers, computer manufacturers, and the corporations behind them may well want us to substitute virtual for actual reality (and with today's threats to the global environment, who isn't tempted every now and then?). After all, the less engaged we are the more complacent we become, and complacency breeds a willingness to purchase whatever product — necessary or not — is placed before us. But it seems to me that being a part of the community's full landscape requires informed and active participation. And active participation is not possible with earplugs. Instead, face-to-face communication, sustained discourse, and keen listening must prevail.

Just as we must act on the greatest environmental and technology challenges of the day, we must also guard against the complacency that our ever-evolving virtual worlds foster. Though the risks to person and place are considerable, the risks to ecological media are also significant: apathy, ignorance, and negligence in the largest sense. And yet — can't virtual platforms foster the goals of educating people about the environment and promoting action at almost every level? Can we use the One Ring for good...?

3. What's the actual/virtual place of digital literary media?

Digital Literary Media Defined

Digital literary media, as a genre of publication, has grown considerably in the last few years. In its most basic form, digital literary media = literature available in a digital (i.e., electronic, and for all intensive purposes = online) format.

At one end of the spectrum lie online journals that are simply internet-based versions of print journals, offered either in HTML or PDF formats. *Elsewhere: A Journal for the Literature of Place* is one example — with an HTML interface, each issue is a PDF that may be read online or downloaded/printed to read offline. Or check out the *Coe Review* for an interesting (though still static; perhaps forever static since the "current issue" dates back to 2005) presentation of print within an HTML wrapper.

At the other end of the spectrum lie journals and delivery mechanisms that go far beyond online print. I think of *Born Magazine* — "an experimental venue marrying literary arts and interactive media," usually in a Flash-based format —; *Shape of a Box*, YouTube's first literary journal, which means it's the first all-video literary journal, as far as I can tell; and *Rabbit Light Movies*, a biannual journal of poemfilms.

What about television and film? Surely good documentary, for example, has as much literary merit, longevity, and power as traditional literature. Yes, but my focus is on internet-based journals and tools, which with increased bandwidth can deliver television shows and movies, as well as videos, podcasts, and other interactive features.

Which makes me think: What's the future hold?

Digital Literary Media Redefined

The future of digital literary media is constrained only by technology itself. Just as communications from the static desktop-oriented computer migrate to smaller mobile devices — cell phones, iPhones, wrist watches — so literature will migrate.

In a way, the future of digital literary media is the future of the internet, which, according to *LearntheNet.com*, is this:

While PCs were once the primary means of accessing the internet, we're now seeing internet-enabled devices such as PDAs and mobile phones that send and receive email and access the web. Soon, everything from your car to your refrigerator will be connected to the global network, communicating with each other wirelessly.

Electrolux, best known for its vacuum cleaners, has developed the Screenfridge, an internet refrigerator that manages your pantry, among other things. It emails a shopping list to your local supermarket and coordinates a convenient delivery time with your schedule. Say hello to a brave, new world.

What's surprising to me, given the rapid rate at which technology changes, is how long Electrolux's vision is taking to come to fruition. In the mid-1990s I worked for Western Area Power Administration's energy service program. As an energy program manager, I

was aware of plans to use the refrigerator — as the central and largest appliance in the house's central and most used room — as the home's energy monitoring interface. That internet access and other systems management would share the interface is only logical.

Access anywhere, anytime (a slogan for pretty much everything nowadays, it seems) defines the future of digital literary media. What's that mean for ecological media?

Ecological media can be even more succinctly delivered — to your computer, phone, wrist watch, refrigerator. And before long, implanted directly into your brain (no, really, I mean it, and so does Pattie Maes). A brave, new world indeed. More like: Demagogues of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your internet connection!

4. What literary e-journals foster sense of place?

Some Journals

I'd be remiss to create a list of digital literary media that fosters a sense of place without including *Terrain.org*, so let's get that one out of the way, eh?

Terrain.org: A Journal of the Built & Natural Environments

A biannual, theme-based journal that includes editorials, poetry, essays, fiction, articles, reviews, an interview, the ARTerrain gallery, and the UnSprawl case study in each issue.

Other online environmental journals include:

Canary: A Literary Journal of the Environmental Crises

"So often the poets of a culture are the canaries, the first ones to be hurt by trends so large that they are not immediately visible. This time the poets are raising our voices on behalf of the natural world, which cannot articulate its plight."

Elsewhere: A Journal for the Literature of Place

A journal dedicated to publishing a broad range of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction that expresses a "storied relationship" to place, to quote Barry Lopez.

In the Mist: An Outdoor Literary Magazine

A magazine by and for women that includes poetry, prose, travel writing, and artwork.

Silk Road: A Journal of Writings on Place

"Silk Road offers writing that takes readers into locations — real or imagined, minute or vast, evolving or timeless."

The Straddler

The Straddler is an online interdisciplinary journal of culture, publishing innovative criticism, essays, art, poetry, fiction and interviews, all of which aim to examine and transform their cultural context.

Surprisingly, that's pretty much it for environmental (and place/culture) journals publishing solely online.

Some Other Journals

The digital realm of literature is not, of course, comprised solely of online journals like *Terrain.org*. Many journals originated as print publications and now feature online content — content often available only online, or that supplements print and online pieces, such as blogs and commenting.

Here are a few of my favorite place-focused literary sites:

Camas: The Nature of the West

Publishing nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and photography, the journal's goals are to encourage a dialogue on environmental and cultural issues in the West; celebrate the people who work, study, write, and live there; and provide an opportunity for students and emerging writers to publish their work alongside established environmental authors.

Ecotone: Reimagining Place

Ecotone is a literary journal of place that seeks to publish creative work about the environment and the natural world while avoiding the hushed tones and clichés of much of so-called nature writing.

flyway: Journal of Writing and Environment

A journal of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction that refocused in 2008 to build on its roots in creative writing and environment programs at Iowa State University, where it is published.

Isotope: A Journal of Literary Nature and Science Writing

Isotope honors the tradition of nature writing — while moving beyond it (even challenging it) with a wide range of work that engages such fields as astronomy, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, sexuality, urban ecosystems, restoration ecology, physics, and math.

Next American City

Not a literary magazine, but the online features of the print magazine are often literary in nature. *Next American City* is a national quarterly magazine about making cities better.

OnEarth

The Natural Resources Defense Council's magazine of prose and poetry, it explores politics, nature, wildlife, culture, science, health, the challenges that confront our planet, and the solutions that promise to heal and protect it.

Orion: Nature / Culture / Place

Published by The Orion Society, *Orion* magazine combines the highest quality prose, poetry, and artwork — now with a fully digital edition of the beautiful print magazine also available.

Weber: The Contemporary West

Published by Weber State University, *Weber* publishes fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and artwork focusing on the places and cultures of the American West.

Something Else Altogether Enticing

Literary journals are not the only online offerings that foster a sense of place. Check out these nifty sites (many oriented toward my urban design interests, I admit):

Arounder

Travel and lifestyle in 360-degree virtual reality.

ConservationEconomy.net

What does a sustainable society look like?

Digital Urban

Modelling, visualizing, and communicating urban environments (blog).

Grist

A beacon in the smog — news, commentary, and essential reading.

High Country News

For people who care about the West.

PLANETIZEN

Urban planning, design, and development network.

Project for Public Spaces

Building community, creating places, using common sense.

Trulia Hindsight

Zoom in close enough to any location in the U.S. to see development patterns between 1900 and 2008 bubble up before your eyes.

WorldChanging

Pragmatic ways to make the world a better place.

5. What role does *Terrain.org* play?

About Terrain.org

The soul is a region without definite boundaries:

it is not certain a prairie
can exhaust it

or a range enclose it:

— from "Terrain" by A.R. Ammons

Terrain.org: A Journal of the Built & Natural Environments is a twice yearly online journal searching for that interface — the integration — among the built and natural environments, that might be called the soul of place.

It is not definitely about urban form, nor solely about natural landscapes. It is not precisely about human culture, nor necessarily about ecology. It is, rather, a celebration of the symbiosis between the built and natural environments where it exists, and an

examination and discourse where it does not.

The literary, journalistic, and artistic works contained within *Terrain.org* are of the highest quality, submitted by a variety of contributors for a diverse audience, including some of the finest material previously appearing in *Terra Nova: Nature & Culture*. The works may be idealistic, technical, historical, philosophical, and more. Above all, they focus on the environments around us — the built and natural environments — that both affect and are affected by the human species.

Terrain.org strives to be both a resource and a pleasure, a compass and a shelter:

- Technical and journalistic works are aimed at professionals and other interested individuals and groups. These contributions can help communities develop and redevelop in a more sustainable manner.
- Literary and artistic works allow the reader to relax and enjoy the pieces for what they are.

All work contained within *Terrain.org* is accessible to all interested audiences. While a case study may help a community planner in his or her job, it may also inform a banker, inspire a student, and educate a mechanic. While a poem may give joy to a teacher, it may also provide a brief sojourn for a scientist, give cause to reflect for a developer, and give hope to a housewife (or househusband).

The works contained within *Terrain.org* ultimately examine the physical realm around us, and how those environments influence us and each other physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Terrain.org is edited by Simmons Buntin, Patrick Burns, and Catherine Cunningham, and is advised by an international editorial board that includes folks like David Rothenberg, Lauret Savoy, and Jessie Lendennie.

Literary Work

Terrain.org's literary work includes:

- Poetry
- Fiction
- Essays
- ARTerrain Gallery

Each issue usually includes work by ten to twenty poets (with audio) plus three to five short stories and five to seven essays.

Essays with online slideshows — such as "Devils Bargains" by Stephen Trimble — and poem/image/audio collaborations — like Eric Magrane's "After We Have Turned All the Mountains Into Ideas and All the Birds Into Metaphor" — truly take advantage of the journals HTML format.

Each issue is archived indefinitely, which gives (virtual) shelf life both to the contributions and the contributors themselves.

Technical Work

Technical work appearing in *Terrain.org* includes:

- Articles
- UnSprawl Case Study

The journal's articles often delve into the art of place-making, focusing on specific projects. For example, *Terrain.org's* "Symbiosis" issue, No. 23, includes "One Green Thing Leads to Another: Sustainability at the Pringle Creek Community" by Jim Fitzsimons and "Building and Dwelling in the Mountains: The Sage Mountain Center Story" by Kathryn Bundy.

The UnSprawl case study is a deeper analysis of a community or project that is notably pedestrian-oriented. Check out the comprehensive study of the Villages of Loreto Bay in Baja California Sur, Mexico, for example.

My hope is that site visitors who come for the literary work explore our more technical contributions, and vice versa.

Litechnerary Work

Just as literature moves toward the mainstreaming of hybrid genres — flash fiction, prose poetry, lyric essays — so *Terrain.org's* online format allows it to include work of an integrated literary and technical nature: litechnerary (a term not likely to be replicated, you may be happy to know).

Terrain.org contributions that loosely fit that definition include:

- Guest Editorial and regular Columns
- Reviews
- Interview

Even within the categories, however, there is overlap. Articles often contain a lyricism, and as with "Rice Island: Bali and the Cultivation of Tradition," stunning photography and narratives.

6. What's the future of *Terrain.org*, as ecomedia and otherwise?

Scenario 1

What does the future of *Terrain.org* hold?

The first and most static scenario is what we might call "business as usual." *Terrain.org* continues to chug along offering poetry and prose, audio content, photography and other beautiful artwork, and a few more interesting, interactive pieces.

Our focus remains the computer monitor (or its domestic equivalent, some day: the Screenfridge).

It's not a bad scenario, as contributions remain strong, and available through the archives until the end of time — or thereabouts. But is it the best scenario?

Scenario 2

Under Scenario 2, *Terrain.org* trends more with technology itself. The journal continues to offer literary and technical contributions — and more interactive features — delivered through mobile devices, ranging from internet phones to Amazon's Kindle or Kindle DX wireless handheld reading devices.

From an ecomedia perspective, I could envision *Terrain.org* channeling more real-time environmental news, given the resources to do so. The *Terrain.org Blog* (under) serves in that capacity to a degree now, but much more can be done.

Additionally, website visitors increasingly expect to be able to provide feedback on the literature, article, or case study. *Terrain.org* will add the ability for registered site visitors to comment on the issue's contributions, providing for an ongoing "virtual" conversation on the piece, which also builds community around the journal itself. I think here of *Orion* magazine's excellent comment feature seen, for example, on Ben Quick's essay "The Boneyard."

What else? Whether virtual or actual, a crystal ball may be in order....

Scenario 3

What's the third scenario? You tell me!

Complete the form at www.terrain.org/ecomedia/q6/scenario3.htm to submit your ideas for *Terrain.org's* future.

7. How do other technologies and resources contribute?

Digital Resources

I've already hit on a few of the digital websites and tools that can help foster a sense of place by delivering ecomedia content. Here are two other digital resources for our cause:

Google Earth

Of course you've heard of Google Earth; probably used it, too. What's doubly cool is the way planners and others are using it to reshape how we think about and strive to support place. For example, the Zoological Society of London is using Google Earth to highlight the world's most Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered (EDGE) species, and to bring the species' locations to life and create an interesting presentation that will engage users in the work to preserve them.

Google Maps

Related but technically distinct from Google Earth, Google Maps use the web browser rather than a distinct software interface. Since users can define locations and add data

to maps to create community resources and topic-specific geographical information systems. For instance, check out this sweet little microbrewery finder: www.crunchyfrog.net/brewerymaps. Not ecomedia oriented, you say? Don't say that to New Belgium Brewing Company, which receives its power from wind turbines and has an aggressive sustainability plan. You can find it on the Brewery Map by going to Fort Collins, Colorado.

Either Google is saving the world to take it over, or it's taking it over to save it. Either way, it offers dish after dish of searchable digital delight.

Place-Based Resources

You could argue that any natural (or built) place that you seek out to reenergize is a place-based resource, and I'd agree. But that's not what I have in mind when I think of place-based resources that contribute to fostering a sense of place in the context of ecomedia. I'm thinking, instead, of local, regional, and global sites that offer information and expertise to enhance sense of place.

Here are just a few:

Center for Livable Communities

"The Center for Livable Communities helps local governments and community leaders be proactive in their land use and transportation planning, and adopt programs and policies that lead to more livable and resource-efficient land use patterns."

Irreplaceable: Wildlife in a Warming World

A campaign that "brings together four distinct groups — from the worlds of art, justice, science, and faith — to highlight the diversity of life we must protect from climate change."

Mother Nature Network

"Environmental news and information that makes sense."

Notes from the Road

Erik Gauger's "personal project in experimental travel writing" that is sumptuous in its photography and graphic design and true in its mission.

Need more? Check out *Terrain.org's* list of links: www.terrain.org/resources/links.htm.

8. What's it all mean?

Conclusion

Sense of place is an intrinsic value both online and off. In the digital realm, it is fostered through content — information, literature, artwork, and entertainment — and delivery — the tool or platform through which the content is made available. Literary environmental journals such as *Terrain.org* provide a compelling and popular platform for content and delivery both.

The future of ecomedia as it relates to e-journals seems wholly dependent on technology. Already e-zines take advantage of interactive features such as commenting and video, and plan for delivery on mobile and household devices.

An equally intriguing question is: How will content likewise evolve? Art accommodates digital media as the technology advances; will environmental messaging — literature and otherwise — also progress? If it is to promote a sense of place — virtual or actual — I content that it must.

So what's it all mean? So long as journals like *Terrain.org* can keep up — no easy task with the exponential rate of technology change — sense of place may not only survive, but thrive.

In the context of environmental issues, the future of ecomedia