

THE URBANISATION OF PARADISE

A contribution to a Symposium on "Ethics of Urban Development in the Western Cape", 22 June 2006, hosted by the Unit for Environmental Ethics in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch.

There are two lovely roads that lead from Cape Town into the hills and on to Hermanus.

Across Sir Lowry's Pass to Grabouw, through the Houw Hoek to Botrivier and on to Hermanus :

a rich variety of fruit orchards, forests, grain lands and dorpiess, farm stalls that are more or less twee, a squatter settlement, remnants of fynbos. Little remains that is pristine landscape, human industry and settlement are transforming this land beyond recognition.

And then there is the road that hugs the coast :

Gordon's Bay, the desolate scree slopes above Koeëlbaai, the road passing behind Cape Hangklip to the south coast where the Palmietberge front the ocean, towering sandstone cliffs above a majestic sweep of fynbos covered slopes descending to the sea. House high boulders lie scattered in the close cropped and wind swept vegetation, wherever their crashing descent from the mountains above had run out of momentum. The African continent coming to the grandest of finales against the shores of the southern ocean.

Two roads that couldn't be more different : one through a wilderness being made more intimate by being transformed into an orchard. The other through a grand wilderness being debased by rampant urban sprawl.

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I would like to address the issue of 'urban sprawl'. Not the one kind where a growing city continuously extends its boundaries by spreading into surrounding rural areas. Bursting at the seams, you might call it. Rather the other kind, where attractive natural areas are being claimed by holiday houses that lead with time to greater density, a kind of surreptitious urbanisation.

It seems that any attractive stretch of South African landscape can be claimed for private use, parcelled out and built on. Witness the coast from Rooiels to Hermanus, via Pringle Bay, Betty's Baai, Kleinmond, Arabella, Fisher Haven, Hawston, Vermont, Onrus and Sandbaai. All once pristine landscape, amongst the finest in the world, that has been lost forever to the public and future generations because of greedy development.

In the first place it is the beauty, the uniqueness of the natural setting that attracts holiday makers. A few humble dwellings are erected, the pioneers still like to rough it. The impact on the landscape is still small. The location becomes better known, others want to have their bit of fun as well. More houses are put up, people now want more mod cons, so the dwellings get larger. The holiday house advances from a retreat to a status symbol. Suburban mansions appear, grand in scale, their aesthetic owing everything to the suburbs, nothing to a rural typology of buildings. The end is an urban sprawl, buildings competing for attention, competing for unspoilt views not yet blocked by encroaching neighbours. Does a rude awakening follow for owners, that the initial reason for being there, the peace and magnificence of nature, have largely disappeared? Possibly so, yet who would admit a mistake, that a dream has been lost? After investing so much.

What however of the public, the remaining 99% of the population? What was once a pristine, even sublime natural setting that anyone could enjoy, has been spoilt by selfish development.

What lies at the root of such thoughtless development?

'First come, first served' – The attitude that all virgin land (if such a thing ever existed), is there to be claimed. There is of course a long history for that practice in our land. As European and Nguni arrived, claimed dominion over some stretch of land, settled, prospered and multiplied. Once things got crowded, next generations could always move on and find new 'Lebensraum'. Vast stretches of 'virgin' land beckoned, one simply had to arrive and lay claim to it by putting up one's homestead and graze the cattle. Beware anyone to arrive moments later, for this was now owned land.

The first to arrive was a settler, the second a trespasser.

'Return to nature' – The first settlers were motivated in their choices by pragmatic, affirmative reasons: to make a living for themselves and their children, free from danger and interference. You settled where there was water, grazing and security. The new settlers are motivated by escapist longings. For the upper classes the cities provide all the material needs that the original settlers still had to wrest from nature. But life has become hectic, crowded and polluted, the blessings of civilisation are offset by the curses. A longing for simplicity and communion with the land and weather that once nurtured us, leads people to escape into 'unspoilt' nature. Yet, please, not without the mod cons one has become accustomed to. So the city gets dragged along: substantial houses, double garages, driveways with all-night illumination, security.

A longing to return to live before the Fall. Paradise gets urbanised.

Four objections can be raised to what has been happening:

1. The attitude that *'First come, first served'* & *'Winner takes all'* means that the race is on for desirable settings. The first to claim or purchase can have it all their own way, have the right to unwittingly despoil the landscape to their heart's content. Their contemporaries have to put up with is a degraded landscape with 'keep out' signs.
2. Areas of outstanding natural beauty are shrinking fast, in an inverse relationship to a growing population. Once human settlements were islands in vast open landscapes. The reverse is now true. Islands of untouched landscape are shrinking fast in a sea of urban sprawl.
3. Only all very small proportion of the population has the means to join in this scramble. Or to enjoy a private holiday in such a setting. What should be a common right for all to free movement and the enjoyment of nature has been privatised by the well off.
4. The arrogant attitude that what we think now is right can be foisted onto future generations as well. We think we can build over any beauty spots; we think mock-Cape Dutch mansions or concrete boxes are desirable. Our life span is short though, others after us have to live with the consequences of our deeds. Not only do we treat nature with disdain (though we claim to adore her for our escapes), but we also treat future generations with disdain. We remove their right to unspoilt wilderness, their right to relate to and live in natural settings in less concrete ways. Concrete being concrete.

There is much to be learnt from the work of archaeologists.

Not only from what they tell us about life in the past, but also from the ethics practiced by the profession. Like architects and planners they also deal with a rare and inherited asset : ancient deposits that have survived in very limited locations. When they excavate, they practice restraint. They will only touch part of a site, excavating and analysing that fully. The remainder is left completely undisturbed. This springs from a realisation that the present understanding and techniques of the profession are limited, and that future generations are sure to reach much more advanced findings, should they choose to come back to the same site to excavate and interpret a further stretch. Had all of a site been dug up first time round, out of the greed that there may just be a sensational find hidden there, then there would have been nothing left. That was how Victorian gentleman treasure hunting archaeologists had practiced, but the lesson was quickly learnt.

Restrain yourself! Future generations will see things differently. Be humble, know that what you think now is acceptable to do, is likely to be frowned upon and regretted in future. Balance your right to transform the environment in one lifetime with that right for uncountable future generations. We are but short-term stewards of huge assets that have come down to us from a long evolution and history, stewards of assets that all future generations will still build their life upon.

Some assets are scarce and can be lost irretrievably. Virgin areas of outstanding natural beauty are such. Too much of this has already been claimed by present generations, enough to put a moratorium on any further encroachment for a long time to come!

From now on build on the bad land. There is plenty that has gone bad through human hands and needs to be redeemed. That leaves the good land to be seen and enjoyed. By humans and by the beings of nature.

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An afterthought:

The two roads to Hermanus illustrate our various attitudes to existence on this earth. Take the expulsion from paradise as a starting point.

There is the Grabouw road: we have gone out, been fruitful and multiplied and have toiled on the land, winning our bread by the sweat of our brows. We have striven to regain the Garden of Eden in the orchards of Elgin.

Then there is the Betty's Bay road. We are still shell shocked by our expulsion from Eden. We wish to return to the bosom of nature, regain a state of paradisiacal innocence. Yet we blunder and spoil it all, because we remember that we were also given the task to till, to what we recently thought meant to subjugate nature. Out of immaturity we still think that gives us an absolute right over nature, to serve our needs and desires, and not a duty of stewardship and care for the realms of nature.

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