

Desire Lines

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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13 February, 2022



Cow Path © 2021 Sarah Wert

Many universities are known for their ivy-covered walls and historic-looking gothic architecture. The place I went to for my undergraduate degree was not that kind of place.

I went to Carleton University in Ottawa. Now Carleton started as a continuing education college for World War II veterans, only becoming a university a bit later on. As a young university, it did not have much by way of historic buildings, and if you ever visit its campus, you'll see a fairly ordinary-looking mix of mildly quaint red brick mixed with brutalist concrete, along with a newer batch of metal and glass buildings.

Of course, starting a campus from scratch allowed the architects to really think through some of their goals for the new learning spaces.

Now, the aesthetic quality of these buildings is a mixed bag... the Architecture Building is notorious for being perhaps the ugliest structure on campus, and even the more mild-mannered Student Centre Building was a bit of an Escher-esque nightmare that made you believe

its inner staircases and hallways had their own grip on the spacetime continuum... I once counted entrances into the building at *five* different levels – there was the underground tunnel entrance, the main street-level entrance, *another* two street-level entrances a few stories up, and a second tunnel entrance near the top level of the building. This was easily explained by the fact that the building was by the side of a hill, but it was still a perplexing place to navigate when first entering it.

My particular college was housed in what is called the Loeb Building, a misleading name, since the “building” was actually four separate towers (imaginatively called A, B, C, and D), the floors of which were each connected between the towers by a thin hallway. (And yes, the underground tunnel entrance was located a whole two stories above the street-level entrance... somehow the physics worked)

I eventually learned that, what seemed like a haphazard internal design, was oddly on purpose, and it illustrated a philosophy of space that was pervasive throughout the campus.

The architects made a very conscious decision to place faculty office spaces right next to the classrooms, so that students walking to class would inevitably bump shoulders with their professors. This attitude was surfing on a 1960s wave of equality, and the designers wanted to literally carve this approach in stone. And indeed, the faculty at Carleton was notably more approachable than in other institutions I’ve attended. Calling professors by their first name was the norm, and showing up unannounced to their offices with open-door policies was a commonly-accepted practice.

In the same way, the seemingly-confusing staircases of the Student Centre obligated many streams on campus to mix and mingle, including professors, undergrads and grads, student union leaders, pub-crawlers, the athletic types, and the keener crowds, all of whom had gathering spaces geared to their respective demographics placed beside and atop of each other.

Despite the aesthetic consequences of some of these design choices, and the occasional inconvenience that came from navigating the crowded hallways it created, I grew to really admire the *intentionality* that the architects and campus designers gave to setting up these new places for learning and community-building, making a set of plans in advance so that these spaces invited the people in them to co-create the kind of university they wanted to shape.

There is also a different approach to setting up new spaces, which requires a different kind of planning. And to some extent it involves, perhaps counterintuitively, making fewer plans.

There is some famous lore in many campuses, where the campus designers decided to forego paving paths in green spaces for some time, and instead allowing the people using the spaces to create their own trails. It was only once that it became clear which paths people were actually using, that the administration would formalize those paths by paving over them.

The unofficial trails are commonly known as “cow paths”, or more affirmingly as *desire lines*. A notable example of this is the McCormick Tribune Campus Center at the Illinois Institute of Technology, by Rem Koolhaas, who very intentionally incorporated the desire lines created by the population of the campus into the interior design of the building.

The desire line approach displayed by Koolhaas is clearly different from the approach taken by the designers of the Carleton campus, which relied on actively directing the flow of pedestrian traffic. By contrast, the wisdom of desire lines is to follow the flow of pedestrian traffic that emerges organically.

Rather than grit our teeth in annoyance that people aren't treading where they're “supposed” to, the desire line approach embraces people's natural inclinations and welcomes their practice, perhaps even formalizing it... eventually.

By practicing an openness to go with the flow that real people take in everyday life, rather than seeking to fix it or direct it artificially, the user experience may be richer, more intuitive, and more respectful of people's expressed needs (or desires), not to mention that they are more convenient as they can meet these needs more effectively.

Of course, both approaches can be useful, and while they may seem contradictory, I believe that, in the Taoist spirit, they complement each other. There are times and places in which going with the flow will yield more edifying results than overregulating. And yet, we know that *some* level of direction is useful, even desirable, in fostering cultures and norms that lead to more enriching, safer, and inspiring spaces. If used together, these two approaches can offer a complementary mashup that invites us into looking at challenges with a lot more dimension.

The story of desire and love has plenty of examples when there have been attempts to unrealistically regulate people's natural inclinations to express their love and sexuality, rather than embracing them for who they are, celebrate how they express love, and even formalizing the unions of those who wish to do so. If, instead of trying to "fix" the rainbow of love, we allow ourselves an openness to recognizing the desire lines that people carve out for themselves, then we intentionally welcome a richer, more intuitive society, that respects how people fulfill their needs and honour their desires.

For instance, in our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we have been supportive and affirming of same-sex partnerships and unions for several decades, recognizing that it'd be inhumane and harmful to prevent people from loving who they do, and that supporting people's desire lines is far more respectful, enriching, and even more convenient, than attempting to "fix" something that does not need to be fixed. We have also been part of the process that allows same-sex couples to formalize their relationship, if they wish to do so.

More recently, our Canadian denomination has taken steps to better include our members who lead a polyamorous lifestyle, and we'll have a chance to explore more of what that means later this month, with our guest speaker on Feb. 27.

Of course, there *is* a place for some active direction, which involves a different kind of intentionality. In our communities, we recognize that there is value in upholding certain essential norms to prevent harm and promote the safety and wellbeing of all.

We affirm that any romantic or sexual relationship must be based on consent, mutual safety, communication, and trust-building. And the principle of consent goes beyond the agreement to engage in sexual activities – it also applies to agreeing on the kind of relationship each party wants to have, and how each person in it wishes to be part of it.

Many of you are, or have been, in a romantic relationship, and you'll have likely noticed that this kind of relationship shifts over time. There are times when proactive planning and mapmaking are necessary, to lay down a course for where each of you wants to go in the relationship, to get a better sense of your personal and shared goals, and to set mutual understandings of what is acceptable and what is not, as well as mutual understandings about how you will respect each other. At other times, there is room for more spontaneity, to simply see where things may go and how they might go, allowing your hearts to lead your relationship into mutually enriching and loving places.

At all of these times, my friends, there is room for intentionality, as either of these approaches allows you to get a deeper understanding of who you love, how you love them, and how they love you – if you're paying attention.

And of course, my friends, this approach applies beyond romantic relationships, since relating to friends, larger family, and our varied communities, all require a mix of careful consideration and foresight, as well as openness to allow things to unfold on their own.

My friends, the complementary mashup of intentional planning, and intentionally going with the flow, is a Taoist dance that allows us to grow together, with a sense of caution, as well as adventure.

My friends, may we proceed with prudence, and may we proceed with pride.

So may it be,
With love, with caution, and with grace,

Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #299 Make Channels for the Streams of Love

Words: From Richard Chenevix Trench, 1807-1886

Music: American folk melody, arr. by Annabel Morris Buchanan, 1889-1983, © 1938, renewed 1966 J. Fischer & Bros. Co., harmony by Charles H. Webb, 1933- , © 1989 J. Fischer & Bros. Co.

LAND OF REST

Hymn #312 Here on the Paths of Every Day

Words: From Edwin Markham, 1852-1940

Music: William Walker's *Southern Harmony*, 1835

FILLMORE

Closing Hymn #300 With Heart and Mind

~)-| Words: Alicia S. Carpenter, 1930- , © 1990 Alicia S. Carpenter

Music: Johann Hermann Schein, 1586-1630, harmony by J. S. Bach, 1685-1750

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