



## A KINDERGARTEN CHATS SEQUEL: POND WEED

Oh, so there you are young intern, and why such a concerned look?

It's this gnawing inside me: I've been reading Kindergarten Chats and studying Sullivan's ideas for some time now and believe I'm finally gaining a sense of the powers within myself and of nature as a source of inspiration, but now all I hear is that the four horsemen may be approaching from beyond the rise.

What riders are these?

Those not so fictitious riders, Famine, War, Pestilence and Death: the four horsemen of the apocalypse! A century has passed in the blink of an eye. I am just beginning and now I fear the beginning of the end may be at hand. At least that's the word on the street.

Only four, huh? We ought to be able to handle them well enough – but what about the riders coming from behind the next rise, and the next? What about Water Pollution, Toxic Waste, Acid Rain, Rampant Landfill, Energy Waste, Ozone Depletion, Disease Epidemic, Political Tension, Accelerated Extinction, Global Warming, et al? This horde seems to grow larger every time we look.

That's more than enough to get anyone riled up.

Perhaps if they could see the change taking place and if they really cared. I'm afraid most of us just don't contemplate the big picture. When the limits of your reality are shaped by television, shopping malls, and a consistent 72 degrees, then salamander mating rituals, retreating glaciers, and denuding forests seem like a long ways away and more the concerns of eco-kooks with not enough responsibilities to keep them occupied. Viewing an image of fish skimming a creek surface to escape the oozing mud caused by adjacent site excavation an architect announced that people were more important than mosquito fish. That's hard to refute (being a person and all), though I wonder how many mosquito fish mother nature considers the equal of a human being. Well, anyway, I think it's safe to say it's not our divine destiny to rape and plunder the planet!

You're starting to sound a little edgy there, Chief.

Bear with me a moment and consider this: How many more buildings (and how much more infrastructure) will it take to get our neighborhoods, our towns, our cities developed to something approaching optimum build out? What's the ideal? Like a finished piece of accomplished artwork which can neither be added to nor subtracted from without diminishing the piece.

I don't think that is a proper comparison because unlike specific works of art, the built environment is an ever growing and adapting system with its own laws of existence. Cities are constantly being filled with incredible, soaring buildings and the intensity of life in the urban core is powerful.

And I expect you find this exhilarating?

Sure! The hustle and bustle is amazing, although I suppose there may be more people and automobiles than I might like...

And what do you make of the vast tracks of development outside the city limit – what we call the suburbs?

It seems Okay. I remember when some of these areas were places we would go for weekend drives and picnics. This is no longer where man's spirit communes with the natural world, but these developments do provide for the needs of a lot of people...

These vast, vapid, and soulless areas are devoid of your urban core and, for that matter, of any buildings that might nourish the spirit. People seem to like reproducing and the more people we have the more of these "quickie" buildings we will have as well. More and more of less and less.

I understand your point of view, but with the use of green and sustainable building practices it appears we can now have a win-win situation for both mankind and the environment.

Those words are not exactly music to my ears.

What words?

Those eco-words. Another architect recently proclaimed that future construction efforts should aspire not for just twenty-five years of sustainability, but for as much as one hundred years. What the hell kind of sustainability is that? What did you say about a century in the blink of an eye? If, that's so then even a thousand years is just ten blinks of an eye! So much of this green-speak is no more than a marketing response by those ready to jump on any profitable bandwagon. Talk is cheap. These continuous eco-platitudes are too often insincere and to my ear even offensive. Most people are perfectly happy to consume more of the environment with green devices rather than with the other colors... it placates the conscience and has a nicer sound about it. Show me someone who abhors waste, picks trash up out of their path, and contemplates peace with gophers and pigeons, and that's somebody I might be able to place my trust in.

I guess there is an over abundance of rhetoric, but surely you applaud the numerous individuals and organizations that have worked to reduce our environmental impact, and furthermore, have made great strides in raising public awareness. Many governing agencies are now beginning to require their new buildings to meet new standards of environmental responsiveness.

And is that enough?

Is what enough?

I mean is architecture that complies with a multitude of rules, codes, regulations, point systems, time lines, and schedules worthy of applause? Are these to be among our finest accomplishments? Isn't this just a kind of pragmatism?

I hope there can be a lot more to it than that.

I applaud sincerity, but you're going to have to do more than just hope. If there is going to be more it will be because you will it to be...make it so Number One.

Too much TV? We have a host of pragmatic problems to solve in our designs. What about the notion that spirit and emotion in architecture lie at its core? Do you think that these can contribute to planet well being?

The essence of sustainability is embraced by the profound sense (not understanding, sense!) of the rhythms of life. It is the changing of the seasons and the changing of the generations; not just human life, but all life on the planet in concert.

The way you combine the irrational and rational can make for a pretty hazy landscape for some of us youngsters. Maybe it's just my inexperience: aren't you heartened that not just the profession, but laymen as well are now singing the praises of the environment, and ecology, and sustainability, and well...just this whole green movement thing?

When someone announces their use of low voc paints...a vision flashes through my mind...

When I read about the latest viral epidemic...a vision flashes through my mind...

When a building is proclaimed green and LEED certified...a vision flashes through my mind...

My vision is ... THERE ARE TOO MANY OF US.

That may be, but to be fair, what about the reductions in energy use, the efficient use of materials, and healthier environments? The way you talk sounds like our efforts to recycle, use more efficient materials, and reduce energy does not lead to sustainability.

The notion of using less and less in order to supply more and more is preposterous. At the very best it is just buying time. No amount of fluorescent lights is going to solve our energy problems. Even if it were somehow magically possible to increase the efficient use of a particular material by, say 20%, how long do you think it would take for our increasing population to reach parity?

I'm not sure.

It's not a 20% reduction because as soon as the demand has increased 20% you're back where you started, but the demand will not stop there, it will continue to increase every year. The increased efficiency is commendable – but this is not sustainability by any stretch of the imagination. Sustainability means equilibrium; it means not using the earth's resources faster than she can replenish them. If the population doubles in another 80 years then whatever savings might have been accomplished will be consumed in only a few generations. The good news is that with the world's present population we can expect our efforts to prolong the availability of the earth's major resources for many years. The bad news is that with accelerating population growth we can expect the earth's major resources to be depleted in many less years.

But surely there is plenty of room to house more people...

With the multitude of problems we now have does it make any sense to double or even triple our numbers? Don't we already have enough dancers, enough lawyers, enough workers, enough chicken processing plants, and enough religions? Enough of everything? As long as the population is increasing even ever so slowly – on a fixed sized planet – we're only talking time until we exceed the sustainable carrying capacity. Now that our land has been conquered, ravaged, and subdivided, all that is left is to subdivide it into smaller and smaller pieces to accommodate more and more people. As stewards of the planet (which I find presumptuous) shouldn't we be thinking about the optimal, most efficient, and most sustainable number of people for a given area?

But right now things don't seem all that dire.

There is a classic example of exponential growth where each day pond weed doubles the amount of surface covered and will cover the entire pond in thirty days so how much of the pond do you think will be covered in twenty-nine days? The obvious, but shocking answer is only half! The pond weed will then double again and cover the entire pond by the next day.

So more and more people means less and less of everything to go around – this would impact the quality of food and water, the quantity and quality of the materials our possessions are made from, ...

Of course. You can see this all around you today with so much of our thinking still shaped by the momentum of Manifest Destiny. Less people may very well suggest less economic growth. In fact a stable population would seem to suggest a stable economy, yet most of us want to make more money, acquire more possessions, and elevate our stature in life. Nature has allowed us our excesses and we have taken as much from her as we could carry and now we feel the burden growing heavy. We have taken from her like unwitting accomplices to thievery, and what? Now we are surprised to hear that there may be justice to be handed down? Who would have thought?

This is like Nero fiddling while Rome burns. But is it too late? Can we find ways to overlay our values with a path to true sustainability?

We have developed lots of superficial tactics to deal with environmental problems. While many of these well intentioned folks are developing better Band-Aids for the extremities poor old mother earth is bleeding to death from within. Our intellect has allowed us a kind of artificial control over nature's eons-old methods of population control and natural selection. This is clearly a problem between nature and ourselves. Now we must work with her to find ways to achieve sustainability that celebrates intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth – growth not in numbers but in quality – sustainability that assures availability not for tomorrow, but for the day after tomorrow and the day after that.