



RANDY MACK BISHOP

THE DEVELOPING WORLD

BY JAMES R. WILKINS

I dig ditches for a living. Not literally mind you, as today machines do most of the digging. And not directly anymore, as I now supervise for my father's company the labor of others. But my work involves opening the land and placing in it sewer pipes, water pipes, manholes, septic tanks, utility vaults and other structures that comprise the underground foundation of a city. It's not unpleasant work either, the earth-moving business. Even during heavy rain and the biting cold of winter when trench banks collapse and must be redug; when city inspectors condemn one's efforts as inadequate and project owners withhold payment while suppliers demand their own; when some key crew member battles the flu or family problems and cannot work or work well; when angry citizens protest the uprooting of a tree or the early morning rumble of equipment and engage the political machinery of a city to make their point; in short, when all things that can go wrong do, as they invariably, inevitably must, even then, there is a certain primal satisfaction in shaping the earth.

Our current largest job is a 19-lot development in Cannon Beach. The project follows a line atop spruce covered sand dunes overlooking the ocean and adjacent a state park. The lots are as large as two acres and as much as a million dollars making it a big deal in a small town. Numerous trees will fall in the course of development and 19 multimillion dollar, custom-built homes will stand in their stead. The project is, of course, heavily opposed by some citizens.

One of the major bones contentious locals pick with the development involves its location. The sand dunes it covers belonged for many years to a local conservationist named John Yeon whose heirs sold the land to the current owners. The dunes are canopied with Sitka spruce, shore pine, huckleberry, swordfern, Western wax myrtle, lupine, coast strawberry, kinnikinnick and yarrow. Roosevelt elk and black-tailed deer live in the area as do raccoons, black-capped chickadees, the white-crowned sparrow, marsh wren, double-crested cormorant, and various raptors. Some of these will not survive the completion of the project. But most will. Nature adapts easily to change, filling niches wherever and however they form. That part rooted here will shift and flow into the new parameters of this niche and life will go on with 19 human families factored in.

Our detractors do not share this view. One of them, a well-dressed, 30ish woman stood in front of our jobsite office the other day, gaping, open-mouthed at the machinery spread across the lawn. An excavator, a rubber-wheeled backhoe, a roller and other smaller equipment sat parked behind the two room cabin in the middle of the project. The cabin, which we currently use as an office will be demolished in the course of development. It housed caretakers of the dunes over the years, offered free of charge by Mr. Yeon on the condition that occupants maintain the trails and signs throughout the acreage. Except for the machinery and two or three trees removed from the side of the cabin, the scene this woman faced was much what it had been for years. "Hi," I ventured, "Can I help you?" "Oh no," her reply, "I'm just looking at the devastation."

I'm never quite sure how to respond to what appear to me extreme positions. Part of me wants to laugh, another to yell. I wanted to ask this woman whether she lived in a cave and if not, if she lived in a house, whether she understood how that house got there or the social processes required to produce the fine clothing or makeup she wore. I wanted to know why her life and home and position in the community were exempt from the

judgement she so easily dispensed upon this group. But I didn't. I simply nodded and returned to work.

Last week we received a tree removal permit for the southside of the project that contains 13 of the 19 lots. Consulting engineers, city inspectors and tree-removal specialists watched closely to ensure that we removed no more than the permitted 66 trees. Some of the opposition in the project's two-year approval process focused on the trees to be displaced by people. Perhaps this was only a convenient tactic in an overall strategy. Trees are a volatile issue in the Northwest. Ground has been won in the tree wars and precedent set in the courts. The project could be and has been delayed on this basis. Perhaps, too, these people are simply concerned that humans kill trees in a quest for living space. And I understand and even respect people like this who fight what they believe is the good fight. Still, the guilt-wracked finger pointing of some environmentalists strikes me as poor thinking; implying that humans wrong the planet by using its material, consuming other organisms along the way; as if the processes of Nature somehow include everything but our species; as if our choices comprise an Unnatural Selection diverging from those Nature would make in our place.

I don't see that we fundamentally differ from any other resource-using creature. Prokaryotes to orangutans, all manipulate the environment in order to feed off other living things and reproduce. A beaver shapes its world, logging forests to build dams on rivers. Moles and badgers mine the earth in their quest for food and living space. Mussels cover rocky outcroppings of tidal pools like small cities glommed across a coastline. The greater scope and scale of our efforts simply reflects the scope and relative scale of our mental abilities. We reach out as all other creatures, only a little farther and more powerfully. What sets us apart is our ability to act rather than only react. We move from reason as much as instinct, choosing freely from a range of options arising from them, and shape our world accordingly. Problems then emerge from decisions poorly reasoned. So, perhaps we use our resources unwisely or fail to understand the long-term effects of certain short-term gains. Maybe our methods and motives are just plain dumb and our descendants will look back incredulous at our gross ignorance. But shouldn't this be expected, even desired in a reasonable learning process? Evolution requires trial and error to provide material for selection. Right answers generally emerge from the midst of many wrong ones.

We are, I believe, a part of Nature evolved to the point of self-reflection. We are not separate and opposed to Nature, we are Nature pushing the envelope to see and understand itself. If we make mistakes, if we damage ourselves along the way, if we fail miserably and join the long list of species now gone, still, the process is valid. And it will continue without us. Some other part of the biosphere will unfold increasing complexity in the region called "mind" and try again. Perhaps from a

different angle. Eventually, some branch will succeed and carry the line forward.

Personally, I don't find extinction an appealing way out of the mess we're in. But neither do I like knee-jerk reactionary tales of impending doom for the planet if we don't change our ways. We lack the omnipotence to wipe out Nature. We're more powerful than fungus in the planetary scheme, but more easily uprooted. If we get too far out we tumble off the edge, removing ourselves.

Fundamentalist environmentalists seem convinced we should limit our efforts to hunting and gathering. They may be right, for now. We are in trouble and pausing to consider direction and purpose before forging ahead would be wise. But in reality our collective momentum won't allow. It'll be a midstream course change or a dive over the falls.

I'd like to suggest that the people up in arms about this project and others like it lighten up and face reality. I'd like to suggest that they consider that nothing remains static and grasping for a pristine, old-growth past does little to further their cause. I'd like to point out that much of the time and energy wasted fighting losing battles would be better spent developing projects that align with their perspective; demonstrating what they mean rather than simply demonstrating. But I can't because they view me (i.e., developers and their minions, contractors) as the enemy. Out for money, self-justifying, in denial. Which is a pity, really, because I believe they have a point. Because I agree with their intent and would like to add something of value to that cause.

We do need to reform our approach to resource use. We need to reconsider our building practices and find alternatives to the usual method of scraping the earth flat and planting square boxes atop square lots. We need to evolve our trades to reflect what we've learned through ecology and systems science and environmental studies. Yes, the whole of Nature is inclusive and the Western idea that we possess the earth and not the reverse is laughable. But it is also residual and in effect. And it won't change overnight. So, while it feels good, perhaps, to vent and fume about evil developers and greedy Californians raping the land, and more specifically, the sand dunes beneath our project, the effect is minimal.

In the end this project will be built and probably others like it. People need homes and supplies for those homes and markets will develop to address those needs. Eco-minded sorts with resources of money and will might consider the reality of the process. It won't modify itself. It requires feasible, superior alternatives to current methods of carving our niche in the world. It requires clear demonstration of why and how long-range thinking effects life-long advantages. We don't simply give up habits. We replace them with others. Bludgeoning people with facts and philosophies describing ecological doom provides no compelling reason to change. We need to perceive and desire the success of other options. And this requires more than talk. It requires working models of building practices and businesses that return more to the community than they take out. It requires inspired leadership that matches ideas with action, marching toward cohesive social change and away from divisive us/them ideologies.

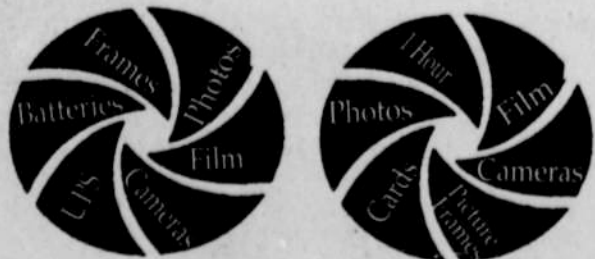
We cannot escape ourselves. We have no choice, if we choose to exist, but to shape the earth around us. Our resources are limited and endangered but they are the material by which we live. The real question then is not whether to use resources but how to use them. And we must explore new directions unhindered by overwrought fear and loathing of mistakes. We must push the envelope, risk the edge and find a way to form the world in which we are rooted and branching so that, in the end, we bear good fruit.

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