

Sacred Grove, Sacred City

by Jay Raskin

Travelling down the path of being an architect has the benefit of requiring me to closely observe how people live with each other and with their surroundings. The editors of this worthy newspaper (or should I say worthy editors of this newspaper) are allowing me to muse on these observations and to reflect on issues relating to architecture. I am talking architecture in its broadest sense, including the art of building, and the design of buildings and landscape and cities around them. -- Jay Raskin, architect and author

A recurring theme in human settlement has been that of sacred precincts, special areas which were separated from the rest for their beauty and intrinsic value. The tradition can be seen today in a more secular tradition of the setting aside of parks and wilderness areas. There is another tradition, less widely recognized, of seeing a city itself as separate and special. The Romans (whose ideas on architecture and town planning often interper western thinking on these matters) set their cities in the landscape by establishing two major streets that followed the cardinal points of the compass. To emphasize the streets of importance, the forum was located at their crossing. The town itself was set off from nature at its founding by plowing a furrow where the town wall was to be, lifting the plow where the gates would be located. Within the walls civilized life took place; the Romans took care with the planning and design of their cities, many of which were of a quite modest size.

The City of Cannon Beach, with considerable foresight, is looking for where it should locate a number of civic needs, primarily a new grade school and sports park, but also an arts center, public works yard, and open space. A Blue Ribbon Commission was appointed to search for and evaluate potential sites. Its recommendations were recently sent to the City Council. It is interesting to note that the issues of Cannon Beach, as a special place and of special places within the city, played a large role within their discussions.

The primary issue was the location of the school. The school district is seeking to build a new grade school to replace the existing facility which is aging and inadequate. Unfortunately, they cannot build on the existing site since it is located in the tsunami flood path. The commission recommended three sites for the location of the new grade school: the RV Park located east of the highway, the Impact site (located on Spruce Street between the wetlands and the Presidential streets), and the Shorewood site (the land directly behind City Hall).

The Commission had broad based representation* and was split evenly between combining the School with the Sports Park on the RV site and keeping the school west of the highway, at either the Impact or Shorewood sites. In the latter scenarios the Sports Park would have a separate location. While the RV site has its advantages, a major reason for the selection of the site was leaving the Impact Site as open space. It is for this reason that the Commission's recommendation shifted to the Shorewood site if the RV Park proved unavailable.

While all three sites would make good choices, I believe that the Impact site is the best solution, for both the school and the reinforcement of the sense of village character that is important to the community.

The Impact site is seen by many as a "sacred grove" and a special place within Cannon Beach. Ironically, this special character is also a major recommendation for those wishing to locate the school there.

The Impact site is about nine acres and is a good example of coastal old growth forest located next to a coastal wetland. It is irregularly shaped, with the majority of it lying south of Jefferson street and a narrow portion lying north along Spruce to Taft Street. Its northern boundary contains some wetlands. It does show signs of human impact with a foundation in the southwest corner (once intended for a Cannon Beach Historical Society building; went on to become the site of the now-defunct Community Garden), and more recently the excavation for a sewer connection that cut through from Elm Street to the sewer ponds. Several trails cut through it and it is the home of numerous children's hideaways. The site has been considered as a location for the grade school and for an arts center in the past.

It seems appropriate that a sacred grove be used as a place of learning since its meditative aspects are conducive to study and, in a more scientific vein, it offers an ideal place for study of the natural environment and systems. The students at the grade school already make the wetland a study area.

This location would keep the school near the downtown, which is a valued and distinctive feature. It would be ironic for Cannon Beach to move the school away from the downtown community center at the same time that educational reform is trying to establish stronger contacts between the school and the community, in particular the business community.

Of course, the fear has been that the school district would cut down all the trees on the site due to state requirements. Fortunately, this is not the case. The State has gotten out of the

business of setting specific school standards and will let the individual school district determine its own needs. In addition, Cannon Beach will have a say in the design of the new school through its representatives on the school board, an active PTO which is also committed to the town, and City control in terms of agreements of land transfer and the Design Review process.

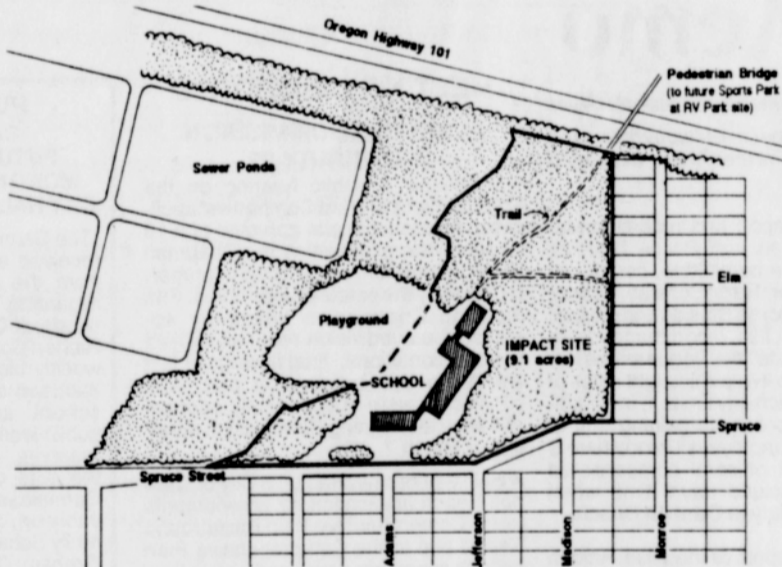
The Impact Site is large enough that the school can be placed towards the northwest portion of the site and leave a minimum of a 200-250 foot buffer of old growth trees between it and the neighboring residential area. The current school site is a bit over 2 acres (including the play areas) and the district projects a 25% increase in the size of the school. This means that the majority of the impact site can be left untouched. The school district has indicated that it is open to preserving as many trees as possible and to considering two story buildings to reduce the impact on the site. The impact of the playground area could also be lessened by using an unused portion of the sewer pond adjacent to the site.

During the Blue Ribbon Commission discussions, the use of the school as an Art Center and Community Center was proposed. From an urban design point of view keeping the Art Center/Community Center near either Downtown or Midtown would be an important element in its success. The fact that the Impact site would also offer a beautiful natural environment would make the facility all the more attractive. It is these connections and relationships that go to creating village character.

There is also a strong environmental argument that we should build cities so that major elements of the town should be within walking distance to reduce the necessity of cars. Keeping the school near the Downtown would be in keeping with this. So would be locating the Sports Park at the RV Park and building a bridge across the highway that would connect the Sunset area to the Downtown at a highpoint that is fortuitously located at the southeast corner of the Impact site. The RV Park is large enough to have a full sized soccer field and separate baseball diamond.

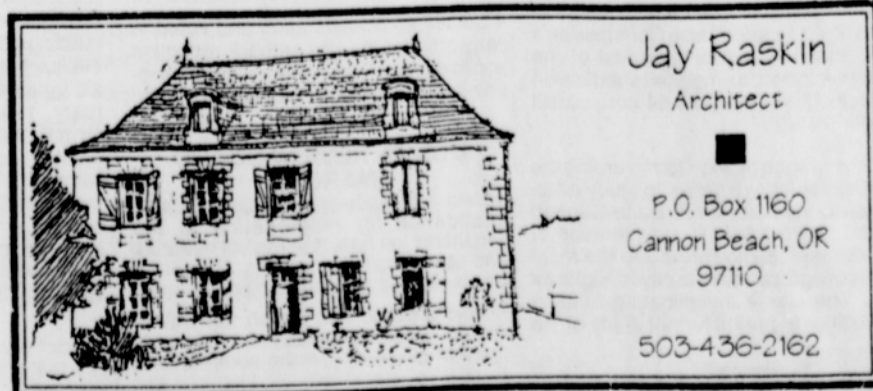
Given all this there still is the voice that says that perhaps this area should be left as it is, that as the surrounding forests are cut it is good to leave a piece of forest intact within the City. As in all things, a balance needs to be found. With the beach, Haystack Rock, the nature preserve above the Haystack area, and the proximity to Ecola State Park, Cannon Beach already has a large endowment of sacred places. Given that the majority of it can be preserved, locating the School at the Impact site would create a unique and beautiful addition to the City, adding to the specialness of Cannon Beach.

The City Council has set up a public meeting on Tuesday, April 7th, to discuss the recommendations with the Blue Ribbon Commission and the public.



* The author was the Cannon Beach Arts Association representative to the Blue Ribbon Commission. He also is a practicing architect in Cannon Beach.

(Editors' note: This writing represents a good argument for only one of the sites mentioned. We would like to stress that this is one person's opinion and may or may not be the opinion of us here at the Edge. [We are particularly interested in knowing what, exactly, the name 'Impact Site' implies]. The Sacred Grove is too precious to touch even a needle of one oldgrowth tree without serious reason; and thought, also, to the people who live and have lived nearby for years and their feelings on having a school and public footbridge set down within their midst. The cutting down and paving of any portion of Cannon Beach's public woodlands must -- for the sake of everyone, and especially the children -- be kept at a minimum.)



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It's time to put the peas in, put the stock up in spring pasture now that the roads are clear, and time for the boys to hit up the Peak Restaurant for some steady nights through the spring to get their chops together before the summer onslaught of music-hungry tourists.

Over on the north coast, where the temperatures allow you to move your fingers all winter long, the pickers and gridders are more than ready to lend their talents to the seasonal stream of celebrations.

Places like Camera Bluff and Cannon Beach have always attracted artists, and those in the performing arts are no exception. They play in fewer venues, and to smaller audiences than their fellows in major cities, but they place great value on the place they live, and it helps impart great value to their music.

If you and your friends are planning to visit us this year, we happily suggest availing yourselves of the talents of our many local musicians. Ask around about public performances, and if you're planning a most special event, enhance it with music.

If the event might be just a bit casual, and not everyone is acquainted, and you want to avoid those dead spaces in the conversations but there really isn't room for a piano, just drop Gary a card care of The Edge, and you can have a violinist play 20th century American music with Jazz frosting, thereby correcting any errors in ambiance.

If you do it soon, he'll probably get over his guilt about shameless plugs and horn-tooting, and we don't really need to see him suffer, now, do we?



Photo: Kathleen Williams

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A child miseducated is a child lost.
John F. Kennedy