

Vineyard Conservation

SPRING / SUMMER 2012

SHADES OF GREEN



The Crow Hollow Farmhouse (photo by Samantha Look)

A friend of mine who was passionate about preserving the Vineyard used to say that an environmentalist was “someone who built a house last year.” It’s a weak definition, though; one that speaks only to interests, not to larger arguments or values. Surely it can’t mean we all have a right to do and to build as we please, or that law is the only guide. We’re still responsible for our footprints.

Environmentalism is a prism of many facets, however. It’s partly about conserving what is ancient and good – old things, old ways, nature itself – an idea that isn’t new or unique to this island. But change isn’t always bad, and sometimes it’s necessary. The problem is heedless, tasteless, selfish, and disrespectful change. We’ve all seen it.

We conserve in order to retain our civility in the broadest sense: our connections to the past and the future. Environmentalism is about connections and relationships, not absolutes. And since land and old houses, especially on islands, are inherently limited quantities, and getting more limited all the time, we must balance the imperatives of land, history, community needs, and sustainability.

At least, that sounds reasonable. And I’m generally in favor of balances – which doesn’t mean granting equal weight to all claims. But I’m also an environmental radical, with a lifelong penchant for older and quieter things and places. I just prefer them – period. But I’m also radical in the belief that, whatever balances must be struck, certain things are constant: Nature doesn’t return where it isn’t wanted. Old houses aren’t built anymore, and new ones are often unsightly. Everyone needs both dignified shelter and open space.

Once upon a time, we didn’t think in terms of our footprints. There were fewer treasures and fewer eyesores, or so it seemed, and only visionaries like Henry Beetle Hough saw the need to

preserve land forever wild. If we care more about the old and the wild now, it’s only because we have destroyed or endangered so much more of it.

The land has always had its eccentric champions. Henry Beston looked out at the Cape Cod dunes and asked us to “Touch the earth, love the earth, honor the earth ... rest your spirit in her solitary places.” Before him there was John Muir, and Thoreau. But my favorite environmentalist was a nameless English voyager who, upon sighting Virginia from a ship in 1607, noted “fair meadows and goodly tall trees, with such fresh waters running through the woods, as I was almost ravaged at the sight thereof.”

Today, an environmentalist could be anyone who considers the land and the culture of a place before daring to leave a mark on it. That might mean building in a way that’s at peace with the setting and local traditions, or tending to an old house in need, or – maybe best of all – doing nothing. But with nature, as with art or religion, the connection is essentially spiritual, and it helps if you can develop that capacity to be “almost ravaged.”

I’ve tried. For a number of years I rented an antique farmhouse in Chilmark with a long and wonderful history. Luckily it also had a tasteful extension with a picture window, where I could sit and write while watching Binty, the ancient mare who still rules the back meadow. It was paradise on a lease.

More recently it’s been my privilege to fix up another old place, the former home of a distinguished Island family. The renovation has its merits on the green scale, but I claim no special credit. In part I’m atoning for past mistakes, made long ago and off-island. Another definition of an ‘environmentalist’ is someone who knows when they have something to answer for.

I also know a McMansion owner who is an environmentalist. (His place is tasteful but enormous, a rare blend.) Adjoining his property was a house designed for the suburbs, but built on lovely Chilmark farmland. Compounding the error, architectural trolls had tortured the place over the years, as if trying to get it to further betray its setting. One day, the gentle giant next door bought the place and promptly tore it down, restoring the land. Environmentalism can also mean enabling mistakes to disappear.

Now that my renovation is finished, I suppose I’m one of “last year’s” environmentalists. But I don’t feel any different – I’m the same stubborn radical as before, with a modest success to balance against past error. I’ve tried (with a lot of help) to save some of the grace and wisdom in the old frame while extending its life.

I just hope it outlives me, sharing its messages from the past about ways to live on the land. The 2,000 or so antique homes on the Island won’t last forever, and neither will the McMansions. Nor will the Vineyard for that matter, but it’s got a few thousand years left. Let’s make them good ones.

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