



In Praise of Fallow Fields

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fal·low [fal-oh]

1. (of land) plowed and left unseeded for a season or more; uncultivated.
2. not in use; inactive: My creative energies have lain fallow this year.

~From *www.dictionary.com*

Let Everything happen to you: beauty and terror.

Just keep going. No feeling is final.

~From a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke

The economic downturn has hit my architecture business rather hard. For years, decades actually, I have had a list of clients waiting patiently for me to design their projects. I plowed steadily through my workload, and the waiting list extended into the future just as steadily. Now the backlog is gone. I have worked my way through most of the jobs and have large blocks of unscheduled time. I live and work only in the present tense, not quite sure of the outlook next year or even two quarters ahead. This can be awkward to discuss with friends and colleagues. I see the pained look flicker across their faces when I answer the ubiquitous “so how’s business?” with an unequivocal “really slow.” Apparently, I have offered more than they really wanted to hear, violating an unspoken rule by giving voice to loss. Occasionally I go further, adding “... and I like it.” Perhaps I am expected to say business is great, or at least pretty good, or, at the very least, picking up again. It is apparently safe to talk about loss in the past tense, but not in the present. Some colleagues

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are relieved to discuss loss in the open, taking comfort that they are not alone, but most react as if it might be contagious and pull back. For my part, I am learning to embrace the slowdown for its cathartic qualities. The stillness has within it another kind of wealth—one of reflection, grounding, and opportunity. I have come to appreciate the fallow period.

Until the modern era of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, it was common practice for farmers to let alternating sections of their fields go fallow to regenerate. This gave the soil and organisms a chance to rebuild the nutrient base for the subsequent crops to draw upon. More recently, as emphasis shifted toward maximum production, the soil was never allowed to rest. Nutrient flows were subsidized and accelerated by artificial means. As we have learned, these methods deplete natural resources, pollute the aquifers, and often yield toxic food products. The latest counterbalancing result has been the rise of organic and sustainable farming, including fallow soil periods—a less “efficient” but healthier alternative.

I see a metaphor here for the fatigue in the construction industry and the economy as a whole. The boom cycles are unsustainable without artificial subsidies and become unhealthy when pushed past their natural limits. We are realizing, not for the first time but maybe for the last, that an economy that primarily measures success in terms of speed and quantity of production will eventually yield toxic products and cannibalize its own resource base. I am not arguing against efficiency, just appreciating the elegance of certain natural

processes that may appear inefficient, like the plowed fields left unplanted and uncultivated for a season. They are actually quite efficient and self-sustaining. When we think with a long-term perspective, not doing can be as valuable as doing. There is opportunity in stillness.

Many now claim their design practices to be focused on sustainability. I’m not convinced, however, that specifying bamboo floors and solar arrays is enough to deserve that moniker, if the underlying business cannot survive without constant production. What if our own business practices were designed to incorporate fallow periods? Perhaps it would make the business itself more sustainable if it were designed to allow, or to celebrate, pauses in the economic cycle. I have an image in my head from my childhood on the east coast, where we would awake to “snow days.” Schools and businesses were unable to open due to an overnight blizzard. Roads were impassable. Everything was closed. They were wonderful ad hoc days, filled with inventive play, family bonding, and regeneration of spirit. The interruption of business as usual was a blessing, and the days that followed were better for it. This example is obviously more simplistic and rosy than the depths of a recession, but most of us have heard similar descriptions of communities banding together during severe natural disasters, as well. The point is that the surprise and the loss of control can be considered normal occurrences. They are unpredictable and overwhelming at first, but ultimately manageable and useful in their own way, even if that way is not obvious at the outset. How many of us have said at one time or another

that we learned more from a test we failed or a job we lost than from the others?

The specifics of a truly sustainable business model will vary for different practitioners and firms. For some, the consequences of a slowdown are more dismal than for others. What is common to all is the need to become less afraid of loss and stillness. Embracing fallow periods allows change to enter the equation. Clearly, we don’t need to seek sadness or emptiness; we just need to stop pretending that we can entirely prevent them and to end our amnesia about natural cycles. We need to find balance. If we become adept at managing seasonal or cyclical slowdowns, we can build healthier businesses focused on more modest booms and less drastic busts. Architects understand process and change more than most people. We are visionaries, expert in the creation of new patterns. It is important to use these skills right now to redesign our own livelihoods.

The economist Juliet Schor, in her book *Plentitude*, addresses the concept that there are other forms of wealth and strength available in the economy if we learn, or remember, how to value them. She suggests that, historically, as more labor time went into the marketplace, time for community disappeared along with relationships. We lost “a potent form of economic wealth which people can turn to during financial instability or adverse climate events.” We became too busy to cultivate this source of wealth and security. Perhaps we can add it back into the balance sheet now. Similarly, the concept of “slowness” might now be associated with value rather than with scarcity or failure. Slowness allows time to savor, reconsider, and

choose wisely among opportunities. Slowness is sometimes just thoroughness, which is a prerequisite to mastery. If a sign of craziness is doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different result (to paraphrase Einstein) then why are we simply hoping for the economy to “recover”? Do we really want to go back to what we were doing? Or would it be better to lie fallow, pause, reconsider, and redirect? In other words, if where you are now is what you want in the future then plant the same “crops” again. If not, then plant something different. This is your chance. The emptiness of the fallow field becomes less frightening when we have faith and confidence that it will produce again in the future, or more specifically that we can make it produce what we really need and want in the future. Rather than being dead, the bare ground is alive and filled with potential.

Recently, I spoke with Sim Van der Ryn, a leading proponent of sustainability before most of us knew the word. Sim emphasizes whole systems thinking and approaches design as a naturalist and a philosopher. I still draw upon the lessons he taught when I was an undergraduate student of his at Berkeley in 1980, following his tenure as the California State Architect. He had us study the rhythm of energy flows, urban farming ... and compost. We spent a lot of time on how things decay and regenerate. We learned to delight in the breakdown of materials into basic nutrients that became available for the growth of new forms. Only then did we get back to the creative business of design. In the tradition of great teachers, Sim distracted students from their assumptions and expectations about

architectural form and opened a pathway to the underlying organic principles. Similarly, we might now set aside our negative assumptions about the current economic decay and look for the lessons and opportunities that lie under the surface. Sim also introduced his students to the hazards of monoculture—the planting of vast tracts of land with a single crop in the name of efficiency. Monoculture makes that entire crop vulnerable to singular disaster. One particular bug infestation or disease wipes out everything or requires radical intervention and subsidy. The parallels between that scenario and the recent business sector failures are rather striking.

I asked Sim to share some comments with me about the fallow field metaphor. After hours of conversation and a lunch made from ingredients that Sim raised within 100 yards of his table, I had only one word circled on my notepad: Presence. We always came back to presence. In order to advance and to evolve, it is essential to stop doing things that distract us from the wisdom that resides within nature and within ourselves. If ambitious, hyper multi-tasking is a skill of the head, then mindful presence is a skill of the heart. Valuable knowledge and insight reside in the heart, where they are often ignored in the rush to success or the panic of a crisis. Taking time to pause allows us to connect with them and to become available for a fundamentally new kind of productivity.

Endings are required before we can have new beginnings. They are inflection points in the cycle. The cusp of profound change is similar to the demolition phase on a construc-

tion project. Before building something new, it is necessary to destroy old structures that are interfering—to clear the ground. We have to accept loss, and sometimes destruction, in order to grow. We must release the past and its hold on us. During a biographical interview for USC, Frank Gehry described a period in 1978 when, at the age of 49, his work came to a sudden halt. During dinner at his home, in a conversation with his biggest client, the president of the commercial developer Rouse Company, he admitted that he had not really liked most of what he had been designing. So they parted ways amicably, and a few days later Gehry had to cut his staff of fifty down to three. He called the experience “seeing the devil” and said it wasn’t the first or last time something like that happened to him. But the moment was also a turning point when he committed his attention to the kind of design work that aroused his passion. The rest, as we say, is architectural history. He is now one of the most notable and celebrated architects in the world, having fundamentally redefined building form and process. Gehry allowed himself to acknowledge his sense of loss and disappointment. He spoke from the heart. He stopped what he was doing, took the hit, and remained present. Then he was available to follow his inspiration and to use his gifts in new and more meaningful ways.

So, the next time you pass a fallow field or experience one coming into your life as a metaphor, breathe deep and welcome its regenerative power. Embrace the stillness and the potential. ●

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