

College of Saint Benedict

New Academic Building

Sustainability Summit

Guiding Principles for Sustainability

As we develop a sustainability strategy for the New Academic Building, HGA proposes that we draw inspiration from the Rule of Benedict and use the themes of humility, stability, and frugality to judge whether a specific sustainable design strategy is appropriate for the CSB Community.

The Rule of Benedict and Environmental Stewardship

Following are excerpts the "The Rule of Benedict and Environmental Stewardship," by Abbot John Klassen, OSB, that give a frame of reference for evaluating our sustainable design strategies.

"...human beings have an enormous accountability for use of the earth's resources and the trust of caring for the earth and all that it holds. Like all stewards, we must give an account of our stewardship."

"...reading of the Rule of Benedict...reveals three themes that can provide an ethical foundation for thinking about environmental stewardship...the themes of humility, stability, and frugality..."

Humility

"Humility is probably the central virtue promoted by the Rule of Benedict...It shares deep roots with the word humus, or soil, and humor. It is humility which allows us to acknowledge that we are not the creators of the universe, but creatures. It is humility which allows us to recognize that all life, human, botanical and zoological, comes from the ground, "out of the ground." We are one with the soil, with the plants and animals, all of whom "fear God" by their very existence. The human choice is to live within the constraints of creaturehood..."

"If you ask me for one word equivalent to humility, it is the word truth: the truth of our human situation, the truth of our strengths and weaknesses, the truth of our multiple motivations for any action, the truth of our relationships, to each other and to the earth."

Stability

"...an environmental ethic based on a deep and abiding knowledge of the local environment... individuals and communities become aware of the need for environmental sensitivity when they consciously choose to learn from and fall in love with a place."

"...Benedictine stability has to include both a commitment to a specific place and a commitment to a specific group of people. If you go to a place and there is no there, there, it's not a Benedictine place..."

"...exploring, studying, seeing the place where one lives as a monastic will lead to a deep knowledge and love for the local environment and will ground one in a place...Those who live in a place have the biggest stake in it..."

"These and other psalms are embedded with a haunting sense of the fragility and finitude of human living and striving. Life is a gift, a given span of days, seventy years or eighty for those who are strong. Analogously, monastic places are also gift, to be received with joy and care, to be a part of for a while, but then to be handed on to the next generation."

"The earth can also teach us about our lives...the words of a Crow elder: "You know I think if people stay somewhere long enough the spirits will begin to speak to them."

"...By coming to know a place deeply, the set of overlapping ecosystems, the delicate balance which exists between the number of creatures and available nourishment, the patterns that play themselves out year after year, monastic communities will make decisions with an understanding of their consequences. In the event of a serious mistake the community will be around long enough to recognize it as such."

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"This is not an argument against change but an argument for environmental knowledge. It is a knowledge that will lead us to recognize the habitats that are necessary for different kinds of wildlife. It will draw us to learn something about the forest that was originally in a place, to review topography and soil and climate conditions, and reforest if necessary. It is an argument for "wildness," for resisting the temptation to create places where there is not tall grass, fallen trees, and piles of leaves for animals to dwell. This knowledge will change us and the kind of education we give to our students. As described above, nature itself has much to teach about human limits, the seasons of a person's life, the cycle of death and renewal and will be part of the educational process..."

Frugality

"...How do we negotiate our way through all of this, differentiating between needs and wants? What are the long-term environmental consequences of this ethos of consumption?"

"...the Benedictine virtue of frugality offers us an alternative vision of sustainable consumption--based not on want but on essential need..."

"...a genuine peace because each person has what he or she needs to live, the satisfaction of legitimate needs..."

"...regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected. He should not be prone to greed, nor be wasteful and extravagant with the goods of the monastery, but should do everything with moderation."

"...Frugality connotes thrift, moderation, efficiency, simplicity of life-style, and stringent conservation... It thrives on the control of consumption, the reduction of waste, and comprehensive recycling. It is the key to sustainability..."

"Do not be wasteful!! ...There is an enormous educational challenge here, because of the continuous turnover in students. We avoid wasting community resources when we purchase carefully, when we buy things that will last a long time. God doesn't make junk and neither should monastic communities made in God's image. That is why our carpenter shop makes furniture which could be guaranteed for 100 years. Neither should we buy junk, but rather goods which are durable, simple with a sense of design..."

"As Benedictine institutions, where are the challenges to frugality? We are probably most vulnerable to waste in the area of computer technology, where obsolescence is such a fact of life. Computers, printers, and other instruments driven by computers are outdated as soon as they are purchased. How can we get out of this vicious cycle and remain close to the frontier of that technology?"

Evaluating Published Sustainability Rating Systems

There are numerous sustainability rating systems and initiatives in use today. Our task for the New Academic Building will be to develop a "hybrid" rating system that allows us to evaluate our success within the context of the St. Benedict's Community. In selecting sustainable design strategies for this project, we should refer back to the tenets from the Rule of Benedict stated above:

Humility: What is our motivation for pursuing this strategy? Is the strategy pursued as a technological "tour de force" that may force compromise of other natural systems? Or, does the strategy respect the interdependent relationships of all creatures and their environments?

Stability: Is the strategy grounded in the knowledge of the local environment, individuals and communities? Will the strategy have a long lasting positive effect on the community? Are the long term consequences understood?

Frugality: Is the strategy neither wasteful nor extravagant? Does the strategy result in a building that is durable and simple with a sense of design and beauty?