

Define Drain the Swamp

By Thomas Beck, AIA, NCARB

A phrase bandied about in the past four years is “Drain the Swamp”. What does that mean? Why is that phrase absolutely antithetical to what this nation needs to do?

In a certain era in Florida the phrase referred to making real estate available that had previously been the habitat of alligators and wildlife. Most Florida golf courses and resorts are built on what once was wetland habitat. Housing developments like Cape Coral involved building canals which displaced wetlands and well as Native American populations who lived there.

In recent years we have come to learn that this human intervention in nature’s wetlands, draining swamps, will kill the local wildlife, create hazards to the land, diminish human health and generally cause destruction where it is unnecessary. We recently covered some of the reality-based issues caused by such behaviors in our column “Protecting Nature Protects Humans.” Not only does the loss of biodiversity contribute to pandemics, but “eliminating wetlands to expand urban environments reduces the land’s ability to adapt to flooding.” Cities such as Houston, Texas, paved over much of its land, and we can see clearly in flooding events in the area how the elimination of green spaces has decreased the ability of the land to accommodate the influx of water from the increasing number of severe storms. The diminishing boundaries between wilderness and urban settings is introducing pathogens to human populations that people previously were not exposed to in the dangerous ways happening now. Lack of foresight in urban planning is leading to entire communities choosing to completely move their towns.

One example of the lack of understanding of the balance needed in our relationship to nature is the current administration’s attempt to open the Arctic Refuge to oil & gas development. In a beautifully stated quote from The Guardian “This is how beauty dies, how places change forever, how traditional ways of life disappear. All for money, in the absence of the sacred. “Why is it that the destruction of something created by humans is called vandalism,” the author Edward Abbey once asked, “yet the destruction of something created by God is called development?”

We understand that the intent of the phrase “drain the swamp” is the exact opposite of the actual meaning. Those who shout “Drain the Swamp” think they advocate for cleaning up “big government” excess and waste. Recently, during the pandemic, we see a situation in which governing is needed to support the health and wellbeing of United States citizens. Never in our history has it been more imperative to speak truth to power.

What say does an architect have in this conversation? Our mandate as architects is to help create new spaces that build upon and compliment, not harm, our planet. It is our job to integrate, not eliminate, natural areas like the rainforest, the lungs of the planet. It is our job to keep abreast of innovations which help create human habitats in harmony with the earth. Words matter.

Long ago we did not know what the negative impact of our choices would be on future generations. That was then. Decades later we have clear science and empirical evidence of how our actions can and will affect children and grandchildren, those who every generation ought to consider when making choices. Learning from our history is important. Both we and our children should take to heart the lyrics of Crosby, Stills & Nash “Teach Your Children Well”, that we as adults need to understand the difficulties they will face, and they must forgive us for actions we have or have not taken, as long as we are willing to learn from history, and act wisely in the present.

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