

CELEBRATING WATER

In an environment as water-rich as the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, it is easy to use water with complete abandon. We don't save it, we throw it away blithely, we think little about how we use it. Water is taken for granted – as it is in many other industrialized, wealthy, water-rich corners of the world.

We overlook important truths when we are frivolous with water. The first is that water – the treated, drinkable, piped-to-your home commodity used in North America for every household purpose – is energy intensive. Every time we use it we depend upon a vast infrastructure that collects, cleans and delivers it to us, then carries it away, treats it and discharges it far from our homes. Using less water saves energy, and reduces the polluting and warming impacts of energy production.

Of course, it is easy to overlook what you do not see. In aiming for all sorts of goals, laudable and otherwise, modern cities have effectively rendered water invisible. To allow for unhindered vehicle movement, public health, dry basements, tall buildings, efficient maintenance and development patterns based on straight lines and hard surfaces, modern cities have paved over streams, drained wetlands, channelled water into culverts and pipes, and forced this precious resource underground, inside walls and out of sight.

This causes us to overlook another important truth. We know, scientifically, that our bodies are made of water. But we have lost our relationship to it. Most of us only know it as a flow from a tap. We are unaware of its cycles, its ecology. We forget that we share it with salmon and eagles, forests and farms. We don't know where it goes when it disappears down the drain.

Water is perhaps the best place to start the shift towards sustainability because it defies non-holistic thinking. It flows from place to place, adapts to any environment, infiltrates any opening. It is a connective tissue, linking us to our landscape and all the life around us – literally flowing through our bodies as it cycles within our ecosystem. Stopping the flow of water is like ceasing to drink – life withers quickly.

The designers of SEFC were told to bring water back onto the landscape, to make it visible, to “Celebrate the Water.” Celebrate, indeed. For where we have water, we have life. How we treat water is, then, how we treat life. And where we learn to celebrate life – its perpetual flows and transformations of matter, energy, spirit, and yes, water – we take another critical step towards sustainability.

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This chapter explores the skin and lifeblood of the Millennium Water Olympic Village. That is, the green landscape stretched like living fabric over the buildings, and the rain that flows through building catchment systems, circulating back to rooftop and sky, before journeying beyond the development on its various paths to the sea.

Building landscape – once considered little more than a decoration at a doorstep – has evolved into a critical living element of sustainable building. Green roofs support passive design and mitigate the negative impacts of the built environment on the natural one, while rooftop and ground-level gardens encourage neighbourly exchanges, shared food and social sustainability. Bees, birds and barbecues are welcome here. In more ways than one, the building thrives.

The story of water at the Olympic Village can be rendered simply: rainwater is used for toilet flushing and irrigation, reducing water taken from the municipal reservoir. And runoff from dirty streets is cleaned in a wetland, where children and fish can also play. As with all stories of sustainability, however, there is much more under the skin. The intensity of design shifts, the challenge of leaving known territory for new initiatives, the complexity of trying to address multiple sustainability imperatives within single, elegant solutions – these are the stories of this chapter, captured so they can continue to inform the future.

