THE RIVER AS A BRIDGE: THE TRINITY RIVER BASIN MASTER PLAN

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# The River as a Bridge: Trinity Water River Basin

The turning of streams into bridges is a metaphor that best represents the Trinity River master plan concept. With water crisis and the need for community cohesiveness being one of the major factors that define life in the US, the topic of water management overrides local politics. The Trinity river, to the people of Texas means more than just a source of water as it is the one of the greatest resources in the area that joins the people from different communities. To most Americans, the Trinity River is not well recognized, an aspect that has led to underestimation of its importance to the community. This is regardless of the fact that there are millions of individuals who depend on the river as a resource. However, the Trinity river remains one of the major Galveston Bay’s contributors of fresh water (Klaver 2015, 51). It is also one of the most important and largest estuarial ecosystems across the United States. As it flows to the sea, millions of people living in Dallas are sustained by the river, even as they exploit its resources. Civic leaders in Dallas, North Texas, have increasingly recognized the importance of the Trinity River and hence established an ambitious project that will see its development. Nevertheless, the river has remained as invisible as it was before. This paper explores the Trinity river’s significance as a bridge of the Dallas societal cultural complexities, and the masterplan adopted towards restoration of the river.

Bridges serve the purpose of connecting two places that have been separated. Most commonly and traditionally, bridges are physical installations that join two places that are separated by another physical entity, such as a river or a road. Bridges are constructed in such a manner that they are able to overcome the physical barrier without blocking the flow of that entity. This conceptual analysis describes the most essential and fundamental function of bridges. Other entities can also serve as bridges. The entities being connected do not have to be physical and as such, neither does the bridge. The river serves a bridge that connects people who interact with the river along different sections.

The Trinity river is a bridge between the different members of the society, such that it allows them to interact in communion and to share a sense of unity among them. Though it independently benefits the members of the Dallas community, with some benefiting from fishing, others relying on its waters, while others benefiting from recreational activities such as boating, they all share the same perspective of the importance of the river. Though they may rarely mention it, people have a deeper understanding of the significance of the river to their community, an aspect that has allowed them to merge their efforts towards restoring the river to its initial state.

According to Klaver (2012, 11), to understand the philosophical and cultural importance of environmental resources, it is important to have a closer look at the concept of co-constitution as reviewed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher. According to this concept, oppositions are constitutive and co-constitutive in a mutual manner (Klaver, Placing Water and Culture 2012, 16). As such, individuals are only able to realize the importance of a certain object after they realize the impact of lacking it. Case in point, individuals only acknowledge the importance of heat after they know cold. If individuals lacked knowledge of either extremes, they would never have known the other extreme. Merleau-Ponty rejects such a mutually constitutive approach, arguing that the predominant western philosophy views oppositions as mutually exclusive dualists. His work, hence, revolves around establishing latent or operative (*fungierende*) intentionality (Klaver 2015, 47). This refers to the intentionality within beings. As such, intentionality is not found within the human entity and neither is it found within the object of interest, but remains operative between the two entities.

With reference to the question of Trinity river’s mediating, environmental imagination could be termed as operative imagination. As such, environmental imagination is not merely placed in the environment, and neither is it placed in the people, but it remains operative, this means that environmental imagination arises from an interplay between both. Material; and cultural patterns or constellations of being co-determine how individuals conceive or experience things (Kibel 2007, 24). Operative imagination, just like operative intentionality, occurs within a given situation, hence it becomes situational imagination. In this sense, it is within certain embedded events and practices that individuals imagine their future, past, and presence. With reference to the Trinity river, it is upon the realization of the distance that urbanization has established between the people and nature that people have realized the importance of the river and hence readily embraced initiatives that will see it restored. The same could be said about all the other benefits of the river including water, fish, and sporting ground, such that the diminishing state of the river and hence its increasing inability to offer such benefits has greatly contributed towards a situational imagination that calls for its restoration.

River restoration and urban renewal are closely connected concepts since on the onset, they both deal with the revitalization of important community reference points. Urban renewal, also commonly referred to as urban regeneration, is a process through which cities and other urban entities are rethought and redesigned, with the aim of making them more responsive to emergent needs. River restoration, on the other hand, is a process aimed at restoring the natural state of flow of a river. The aim is to restore not just the water, but the functioning of the river system such as biodiversity, landscape development and recreation (ECRR, 2014). Urban renewal takes on many different mechanisms and in some cases, water fronts are an essential part of the renewal process. Alongside green spaces, architects of renewed urban spaces often include waterfronts since they are pleasurable and as such, attract people.

River restoration and urban renewal both have the purpose of resolving emergent needs. More importantly, rivers also have cultural flows pegged to them (Klaver, 2011), which they revitalize when they are restored. (Hirokawa, 2014) highlights that increasingly, cities are viewing rivers as aa route towards economic development and the reclamation of social centers for their communities. In this sense, river restoration is serving as a route for urban renewal. This is the same case with urban centers, which serve a host of economic, social and cultural functions. Urban renewal facilitates these functions, as does river restoration. The Trinity River Vision aims to conserve the river ways to retain them as essential greenways (Trinityrivervision.org, n.d). The masterplan is designed around the river, with a focus on an integrated river restoration and urban renewal.

Rivers serve an important role in sustaining human life. Rivers are characterized by environmental flows and cultural flows. With environmental flows, the focus is on the economic value associated with water systems. Cultural flows attend to the cultural beliefs, values and ways of life of individuals that are associated with water (Klaver, 2011). Other aspects of cultural flow include how individuals care for these rivers or water systems. Reconnecting the city to water is likely to have a positive effect on people’s awareness on water issues. People are able to interact with this water system and this increases their curiosity and engagement with this water body. For example, water is aesthetically appealing and this makes it attractive. People may also engage in activities such as canoeing or other similar activities. This creates a sense of ownership facilitating conservation efforts. This type of management approach aligns to integrated resource management approaches or adaptive approaches (Brugnach & Ingram, 2011). In the case of the Trinity River Vision, the Trinity River is placed centrally, with the design of the masterplan revolving around its conservation (Trinityrivervision.org, n.d). This will essentially serve the purpose of demonstrating the ability of the coexistence of a natural ecosystem within an urban setting.

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