

The Emory University Campus Walking Tour: Awakening a Sense of Place

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Abstract

Emory University's campus self-guided walking tour is a pleasant activity that heightens environmental awareness and builds a stronger connection to place. Brochures present ten sites and facts about forests and water (including damage from storm surges, erosion, and invasive species), the built environment (including new "green" building efforts), and campus history (including architectural strategies, past faculty activism, and commitments by campus administrators). The tour highlights trade-offs and tensions among issues and teaches by raising questions. Issues of health, natural beauty, campus growth, and quality of life are also presented. Guided introductions to the tour seem to be most effective, though the brochure is also powerful used alone. A fun activity for a group, the walking tour builds community and awakens interest among those not otherwise engaged in environmental activities.

keywords

environmental awareness, campus, environmental literacy, place, walking tour

The Emory University self-guided walking tour and brochure were created as part of a larger effort to increase campus environmental awareness and commitment to action. In the summer of 2000, a group of nine faculty and staff gathered to write a small brochure as part of activities associated with the university's celebration of the millennium year. Entitled "Reconciling the Natural World and Human Choices: Ten Sites for Reflection," the resulting text and pictures were published with support from the Office of the President. The tour sites themselves were marked by ten attractive metal signs, shaped like historical markers, whose text was drawn from the brochure. Brochures are available at three campus locations and on line (<http://www.environment.emory.edu/who/tour/index.shtml>). The first printing of 2500 brochures was exhausted in ten months, and a second printing has been authorized. The walking tour has become a pleasant activity for students, their parents, and returning alumni, part of recruitment efforts and some new student orientations, and an assignment for several undergraduate classes. After a quick overview of the walking tour, this paper will discuss the activities and philosophy that led to its development, the content of the brochure, and some early reflections on the experience.

overview of the tour

The tour starts with a forested patch close to the center of campus, a gem of hardwood forest that many at Emory do not know exists. The second site is a nearby commercial district ("Emory Village") where the small campus creek joins the major tributary that drains a significant section of the county. The contrast with the previous site's serene tall forest is stark. Surrounded by parking lots, the creek banks are eroded stone rip-rap, and garbage lines the high water mark. The tour then continues to a new science building on campus and notes both the "green building" efforts in its construction and also the deforestation required. Stop #4 is a small wooded "gulch" near the student center that is a tiny remnant of what used to be a major forested ravine, highlighted by the original campus design. Students pass this site daily, and the tour thus brings into current awareness campus history from the 1920s and more recent efforts to save rare plants during building construction.

Then the walking tour passes over a railroad track to another sector of the campus, where a second "green building" is discussed and issues of architectural siting are introduced. Stop #6 is a medical clinic building and raises the issues of solid waste and the toxic by-products of plastics incineration. Walkers are invited to continue on to a conference center at the far edge of campus, a site of controversy with neighborhood residents who resisted the forest destruction of the original design. The revised building design is a model of construction in harmony with a forested environment. The tour brochure, however, notes that new stresses on the wooded locale have come from non-university building projects nearby. Walkers then head back toward the main campus with side-trip options to explore the forests and meadows surrounding the President's home or a small public park that shows the challenges of forest restoration. The tour's final site is the new shuttle bus road through the largest tract of Emory's forest and notes how limited public transportation in Atlanta conditioned the difficult decision to build the road.

background activities and context

The activities that led to the walking tour brochure began with the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee on Environmental Stewardship in the Fall of 1999. As a broad group of faculty, staff, students, and alumni began to explore strategies to improve environmental awareness on campus, we learned that many of us were unfamiliar with the forests and named locations of the university. A

retired biology professor and former dean led us in a magical woods walk on a foggy Saturday morning. With enthusiasm, we scheduled other “get to know the campus” walks, and they draw between 6 and 30 people. We find that woods walks are among the things people remember most about the year’s activities. Even people who have participated in no other activities but one such walk consider themselves “active” in environmental efforts, which demonstrates that this experience has considerable meaning in their lives. Aware of the limited number of people reached by these organized tours, we began to think about how to share knowledge of the precious resources of the university with a wider group. How can we draw in a broader cross-section of university stakeholders? We hit upon the idea of an attractive brochure that could be a stand-alone teaching tool, useful whether people actually take the walk or simply read the brochure. We hoped that with pictures and inviting text, we could encourage people to take the walk with their friends or family, at their own convenience.

The walking tour idea was brought to reality by the helpful conjunction with special events planned for the turn of the century. Like many universities, Emory wanted to mark the millennium with an activity that encouraged community reflection and intellectual engagement. The topic chosen was “Reconciliation,” and a major symposium was planned, together with a broad range of workshops, speakers, and artistic events. One of a dozen themes for the Reconciliation Year was “Reconciliation and the Natural Environment.” Planners embraced a focus on the local (“University, Community, and Place”) drawing attention to the many environmental challenges faced in Atlanta and on campus. The walking tour idea was presented to the Reconciliation Year committee as experiential learning, a participatory activity outside the auditorium, and something that would have lasting impact beyond the weekend of the Reconciliation Year Symposium itself. The tour idea also echoed the report of a blue-ribbon campus committee that recommended greater efforts to educate the Emory community about history and shared traditions. In this context, the President embraced the idea as a pilot project for a series of historical markers on campus. Support was provided for printing the brochures as well as for the placement of metal signs at each site.

philosophy behind the walking tour: building connection to place

Environmental activists and educators have long argued that local action flows most effectively when grounded in personal commitment to place. Stephen Jay Gould has said that the challenge to save species and environments cannot be met “without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love” (Gould 1995: 14). Bowers (1999) also notes that “reinhabitation” of our bioregions will be an essential part of an emerging commitment to a sustainable campus way of life. David Abram’s work suggests that reconnection with the natural environment through direct, personal experience is essential to reordering industrial society (1996).

The walking tour provides an opportunity to build such commitment to place in several ways. First, it shares important factual information, thereby broadening knowledge. By raising locally-based issues for discussion, it fosters dialogue and reflection. Second, the time spent in a walking tour may also facilitate a deeper personal shift. The environmental challenges we face require a moral strength to question mainstream culture and to resist its expectations. A sustainable future also requires creativity and generativity, which in turn usually require some degree of rest, personal healing, and spaciousness. Our culture of “time famine” (Schor, 1992) works against such spaciousness, and the focus on doing it all, having it all, can prevent the personal unfolding that will be essential to imagining a sustainable future. The walking tour can, for some, provide a slower pace and time to allow the unfolding creativity and personal growth that supports the courage our historical moment requires. Mitchell

Thomashow's work discusses this personal dimension of connection to place. For many, he says, "the direct experience of wild places has a transformational quality" (1995:15), and he also argues that people will not change behaviors or policies unless moved at a deep, inner level.

It is not yet clear from our experience at Emory that such personal transformation is necessary for energetic environmental work. Cultural anthropological experiences suggest that transformation may as likely come through action as before it (Arensberg and Niehoff, 1971). But the emotional power of experience in nature and of learning campus history seems to be very valuable on our campus and clearly serves to galvanize further environmental action.

A third way that the walking tour strengthens connection to place is by building community. Given that sustainability work requires a collective effort, we want to build more such connections because "conservation must grow from the bottom up" (Leopold, 1991:300). In the summer of 2001, we observed some encouraging networking going on during our early-morning guided introductions to the walking tour for staff and administrators responsible for new student orientation. The dozen attendees enjoyed the natural beauty of the woods in summer, and learned campus history not known to most of them. They also express a new appreciation for the value of the tour brochures. Such "bridging" of learning by personal invitation helps support the "faculty and administrators who provide role models of integrity, care, and thoughtfulness" (Orr, 1994: 14). Thus, we hope to continue to promote familiarity with the walking tour through periodic organized group tours with a guide.

writing the brochure: process and content

The informal committee that wrote the brochure echoed the broad Ad Hoc Committee membership: three biologists, a librarian, an English professor, a landscape architect, an attorney, a public health physician, and an anthropologist. The walking tour effort built on over a decade's work by several campus committees, research by biologists and ecologists, and the emergence of a new historical study of Emory (Hauk, 1999). Interviews with long-term faculty activists led to a "short list" of possible sites and stories for the brochure, from which the group chose the final ten. Efforts were made to balance the range of issues addressed and to choose the most urgent. Many iterations of the text led to a doubling in the imagined length of the brochure, and the strong editorial skills of several members led to a refinement of each sentence. A version of the walking tour text was then pre-tested by several people from the community, and further revisions ensued. The final siting of the signs was also a group effort.

Three major areas of information presented in the brochure are spread among the ten sites.

forests

Highlighting our remnants of Piedmont hardwood forest, we begin the tour with an emphasis on knowing the natural ecosystem from which our built environment has emerged. We discuss key tree species, the existence of some rare azaleas and wildflowers, the importance of connectivity for biodiversity, the harm of several invasive species (especially English ivy and kudzu), and on-going restoration efforts, both by the campus community and by a neighborhood watershed alliance. We note the connections between forest health and nearby building construction and the potential contribution of forests to air quality and the absorption of greenhouse gases.

water

The tour takes people along several creeks, some piped and some daylighted. The brochure teaches about watersheds (there are two on campus), local water volume, increasing streambank harm

from storm surges, and the use of forests as a water detention area. We teach about vegetative buffers and recent changes in legal buffer requirements, runoff pollution, trash, and plans for the future. We also highlight some issues regarding the lake beside the President's home: "The lake was created (or perhaps only deepened) by a dam built by Walter Candler, after this land was taken out of agriculture. Should we remove the dam? Should we use the lake water for irrigation? Should efforts be made to control the numbers of Canada geese for whom the lake is a breeding ground?" (p. 13).

architectural history and the built environment

The brochure provides information not widely shared on campus about the original campus plan and the history of some buildings. We note that Henry Hornbostel, Emory's first campus designer, sought to nestle the original buildings along the wild ravines that bisected the campus and we follow what happened to one of those wild areas. We also teach some basics about the LEED "Green Building" program (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). We discuss the sometimes lengthy process of multi-stranded consultation and debate that goes into campus construction decisions and aspects of energy and water conservation in two of the new buildings. We also discuss the role of the Senate Committee on the Environment in successfully resisting some kinds of campus growth in the past.

other issues

Issues also raised in the brochure are transportation—the need for parking decks and our automobile dependence—and waste. The brochure notes that medical waste at Emory is trucked out of state for incineration. "Burning of plastics releases toxic dioxins into the air. Other alternatives for disposal of dangerous medical waste also have environmental costs. How can we move toward a safe, but less harmful management of medical waste? How can we reduce our total waste stream?" (p. 10)

style and strategy

In keeping with its origins in a "Year of Reconciliation," the brochure focuses on trade-offs among different dimensions of environmental issues. For example, a major challenge to Emory at this time is the desire of many units to grow and therefore to add new buildings, but we also desire to maintain our forest stands. We also try to encourage reflection with questions: "How do we restore Atlanta's streams to swimmable and fishable quality as mandated by law? How can we restore our air quality as well? How can we minimize waste? Minimize energy use? Reduce our dependence on the automobile? Enrich our quality of life?" (p. 15).

We also wanted to teach through pictures, and several evocative historical photographs invite readers to a deeper understanding of change on campus over the last 75 years.

In writing the brochure, we tried to avoid technical language. For example, we replaced the term "macroinvertebrates" with "small in-stream insects that support a healthy ecosystem." We speak of "runoff pollution" rather than "non-point source pollution," and we struggled over whether to use the term "riparian buffer" (we left it in). Our goal is to educate, but we know that technical jargon can intimidate the non-science reader.

The brochure tries to present enough positive actions to give the reader hope without whitewashing the environmental harms surrounding the Emory campus. We include several references to successful ameliorative actions, both of groups and individuals, in order to acknowledge the hard work of those people, but also to emphasize that there has been a tradition of awareness and stewardship before the present moment. We also highlight the commitments of two university presidents and a former chancellor to protect and enhance the natural resources of the campus, thereby giving greater publicity to these past actions.

reflections on the walking tour and brochure responses

Most responses to the walking tour have been very positive, though the emotions evoked are varied. Some walkers are fascinated by what they've learned—one person expressed gratitude to know she lives in one watershed, but crosses campus to work in the other. Some find the beauty of the forests and creeks contrasts sharply with the built environment of the campus and neighborhood. One person expressed deep grief over how small a remnant remains of the forests of the pre-European Atlanta. Some people become angry. Some facts shock. During a recent guided version of the tour, we stood in Emory Village, learning about the surrounding parking lot and the way creek organisms are harmed by the heated water of summer rains. The administrator standing beside me exclaimed, "Wow, I never thought about that." Her eyes widened, "But, of course, it would do that." A pause: "This tour is so *important*. We need to find a way to bring this to the Board of Trustees."

length

Evidence seems to suggest that the first four sites are the most powerful, and possibly a shorter tour would have been as effective. These four sites take about an hour, and perhaps a two-hour tour is simply too long. We hear little comment about sites 5-10. It also would be effective to break the brochure into three smaller tours—a possibility for future iterations.

cost

Though our brochure is printed in three-colors and includes a fold-out map, a much simpler version that can be readily photocopied would have been our fallback plan. Other campuses that do not have a millennial year budget to support the activity should not be deterred from attempting to develop their own walking tour brochure.

availability

Another lesson is that brochures should ideally be available along the route. Ours disappear rapidly from the academic buildings and the Emory Hospital, where they are on display. Our website location is also essential for those who need a quick reference to how to find the brochure.

feedback

The Ad Hoc Committee has no way to know for sure the impact of the walking tour. Some kind of assessment mechanism to measure impact would be desirable, and we are looking for suggestions.

attracting diverse participants

Our experience with the walking tour suggests that the many dimensions of the brochure attract different kinds of people, and we hope to use this understanding of diverse motivators to environmental learning in our future activities.

- Basic ecosystem information educates the reader who is interested in science. The brochure addresses the need for facts and is intriguing through the new perspectives presented.
- Information on campus history attracts those who enjoy a focus on the human community and its changes over time.
- Attention to health quickly arouses the interest of some people. For them, we draw linkages between both human and ecosystemic health and note that many of the dilemmas are city-wide.

- Natural beauty and aesthetics draw others, and the brochure provides opportunities to experience nature and to help with restoration.
- An ethic of resistance to modern consumer-oriented society attracts still other people. For them, the brochure probes quality of life issues.
- Finally, there are those who are drawn to the tour simply because it's fun. Emphasis on the play dimensions of taking some "time off" to "get to know the campus" attracts this group.

Environmental concerns call us to a deeper engagement with place. Such an approach is out of sync with a campus like Emory, filled with students from all over the country and from around the world and dedicated to "internationalization." Knowledge of the *local* has much less prestige, and our surroundings are rarely the focus of campus attention, except to complain about traffic or smog. The Ad Hoc Committee on Environmental Stewardship has found that experiences of the self-guided walking tour can be an invitation to those who pass through the campus daily—or for one-time visitors—to shift focus. Even for those who never walk the ten sites, reading the brochure itself offers a new awareness and challenges for reflection. We hope its subtle effects will be seen in a continuing growth in campus environmental awareness and activity. We look forward to a time when environmentally-focused walking tours are a regular part of campus life across the United States and in many countries.

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Bionote:

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