

Sarah Osterhoudt
Discussion for Round Table: Convivial Placemaking
October 8, 2021
srosterh@indiana.edu

First, thank you to all the participants for this thoughtful and insightful roundtable discussion. The conversation brought together scholars and practitioners with expertise across urban and rural systems, encompassing a diversity of sites including urban rivers, community gardens, and woodland forests. During this session, the participants contemplated where and how convivial landscapes emerge, asking what forces may support them and which factors may disrupt them. Collectively, the panelists considered the opportunities, and challenges, for researchers and community programs to identify, understand, and nurture convivial spaces and relationships across human and non-human realms. They noted that, ideally, convivial communities do not only aim to ‘save’ nature, but to rather create communities where all forms of nature can both “survive and thrive.” As many of the round table discussants observed, the crucial role that generative and convivial relationships with nature play have become particular evident during the COVID pandemic, when simplistic acts such as walking in a park or observing a hedgehog in the neighborhood may “help keep people from crumbling.”

Notable to me throughout the roundtable discussion was each of the participant’s own commitment to embracing the concept of conviviality in their interactions with one another. The conversation toggled between theoretical questions and more personal memories, aspirations, and doubts. In discussing topics including squirrels stealing cucumbers, altercations with neighbors, the quest for solitude, and the overwhelmingness of capitalism, the panel modeled the forms of convivial space that they described: a place where people may come together to share and to be vulnerable, without the fear of judgement – an emergent space that acts as a “door to diverse conversations” where people can “take off their various hats” and instead “hold space for each other in nature.” Further, I was struck by the often-playful language and imagery that peppered the discussion, with references to parties, dancing, drinking, and celebration. In my experience, such joyful undertones are not commonly encountered in environmental panels. I found it encouraging.

For purposes of reflection and further discussions, I have a few thoughts to share with the members of the roundtable (or anyone), in case they would like to offer their comments and thoughts:

* The examples of convivial relationships were predominantly human-centric, emphasizing how we as humans receive feelings of joy, comfort, and peace from our interactions with nature. Is there a way to consider if such experiences are reciprocal in any sense across species? How could one go about knowing if humans offer non-humans a sense of conviviality, especially among beings often considered non-sentient? Is this type of question at all possible to explore? Does it matter?

* In encouraging people to seek out spaces of conviviality and “being with” nature it is perhaps natural to gravitate towards the nicer, more beautiful, and less aggressive forms of

nature. Yet, as the examples of squirrels in gardens, hostile neighbors, and polluted rivers show, “nature” represents a spectrum from comfort to despair. Should frameworks of conviviality reach across this spectrum? Is it necessary to embrace all relational forms of human and non-human ecologies? Or is it more generative to seek out the places and spaces that encourage well-being, however these are defined by individuals?

* Even among participants, there was a wide range of how and where conviviality is found in nature. This diversity raises questions of how to balance a presumed universal draw of humans towards nature with the culturally and historically specific ways that this connection is defined and enacted. As researchers and as practitioners, how can spaces of conviviality be open to multiple entry points, so that they are accessible, generative, and safe for all people (and other species)?

* I really enjoyed the discussion of how conviviality is in large part defined by a feeling – as much an affective space as a material one. How can such emotional elements of conviviality be reconciled with organizational and epistemological frameworks of research, policy, fundraising, and evaluation that more often emphasize the measurable and quantifiable aspects of “good” environments?