

Plant Lover's Almanac

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Johnson Woods Nature Preserve near Orrville this past Wednesday: the spring peeper chorus frogs, active in the warmth of late February, missing during the more seasonable cold of much of March, now are back – spring has truly sprung. New green leaves are starting to rise above the autumn and winter mould, and those modified leaves known as flowers of some plants are starting to shine. Spring beauties from white to deep pink, a few early buttercups, cut-leaved toothwort, and the electric chartreuse flowers of the small tree, spicebush – all were abloom. Large-flowered trillium, *Trillium grandiflorum*, with its triple leaves is afoot, and in the Deer Enclosure, the peduncled white flowers were just ready to pop, and I expect they have arrived by this morning.

The return of warmer weather brought with it a second flash of forsythia in landscapes and the forest floor and its ponds and puddles are now a-riot with a cornucopia of forms and colors: muddles of decaying leaves, spreading branches and their shadows, towering beech trees, sometimes Ozymandias-like decayed monoliths, sometimes as healthy as you and me. Forms – this leads me to our next Almanac entry for this week.

As in form and function. In architecture a common concept is “*form (ever) follows function*”. This was coined and practiced by the 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. architect Louis Sullivan and the idea, for example, informed the architectural approach of Frank Lloyd Wright and other “modernists”.

A loose form of this emerged during a recent class trip for my OSU Horticulture and Crop Science class (Sustainable Landscape Maintenance). We had just visited the wonderful “Building Ohio State: From Forest to the Renovation of Thompson Library” exhibit on the first floor of the magnificent OSU Thompson Library (exhibit until May 14) on the Main Campus in Columbus. This exhibit alone is worth a visit, and if you have not visited the renovated Library, do it - today. It has many northeast Ohio references, including Secrest Arboretum and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center in Wooster.

We then ascended to the 11th floor of the Library for its sweeping views of the OSU Oval. Looking out over the wind-milling pattern of sidewalks on the Oval, student David Farrell quipped: “*This is the most terrible example of design I have ever seen – these look like cowpaths*”, decrying the asymmetrical array of concrete pathways among the Oval green. Another of this most-excellent class of students, Pete Grantham, immediately responded: “*Genius*”.

In this case revealing different perspectives on the ideas of **Form**, as in aesthetics, vs. **function**, as in where students, staff, faculty, and visitors probably chose to walk – same as cows. Then, Stephen Tomasko, a professional art photographer who was one of a group of guest instructors with the class that day including book editors, arboretum horticulturists and carpenters down from Wooster, responded.

The cowpath/human idea for urban design is one of the principles of the famed 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who taught at Harvard. Stephen then expounded a bit on Koolhaas and his books, such as *Delirious New York*. Out came the cellphones. Teachable moment. Form and function. Urban landscape architecture. Rem Koolhaas. Form and function is, of course, an oversimplification, and a dynamic interface that is never pure (ornamentation for ornamentation's sake is also ever appealing), but it is an important dynamic when it comes to buildings and – landscape architecture, design, installation, and maintenance.

The principle “that the shape of a building or object should be primarily based upon its intended function or purpose” [as in where people naturally choose to walk] was expressed by Louis Sullivan with these words:

*“Whether it be the sweeping eagle in his flight, or the open apple-blossom, the toiling work-horse, the blithe swan, the branching oak, the winding stream at its base, the drifting clouds, over all the coursing sun, **form ever follows function**, and this is the law.”*

And from Rem Koolhaas:

*“When I published my last book, "Content", in 2003, one chapter was called "Kill the Skyscraper". Basically it was an expression of disappointment at the way the skyscraper typology was used and applied. I didn't think there was a lot of creative life left in skyscrapers. Therefore, I tried to launch a campaign against the skyscraper in its more uninspired form.”* [\[22\]](#)

A perfect lead-in to the New York City field trip coming up next week for the class. There they will see skyscrapers, the High Line Park that interweaves between skyscrapers, landscape design under the duress of a major city, the swamp white oak trees at the 9/11 memorial, planetree allees – and the elm allee in Central Park.

To prepare us for these Central Park American elms, Dave Farrell, in one of his class presentations, profiled *Ulmus americana*. Our native elm is a rapid grower, putting on 2 feet a year through its middle age, ascending to 136 x 85 feet dimensions for the National Champion in Maryland. Fat little buds against the sky in late winter, cascades of tiny flowers as Spring arrives, dark green above and light green below leaves with uneven base to the leaf blades, and often that wonderful vase-shaped shape (form!) that endeared it to Americans throughout much of our history.

Also endearing was its adaptability: from swamplands to rich woodlands, to of course city streets. Alas, almost the last 100 years of the history of American elm here is tainted by the presence of Dutch elm disease. The causal fungus, which plugs up the water conduction system of elms, comes from Asia, and was discovered by the Dutch on European elms. French elm logs, unknowingly to senders and receivers relative to disease, were transported for furniture-makers by rail here in the United States including in Ohio. Alas, an insect, the European elm bark beetle, with the fungus attached, hopped off and found...American elms, unprepared genetically for this new challenge. The insects layed their fungus-covered eggs under the bark – and the rest is history.

A history, by the way, that involves northeast Ohio. In 1929, a man at the railyards in Creston, Ohio in Wayne County, called Dr. Paul Tilford, a plant pathologist at the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station (now OARDC) in Wooster and said all the trees were dying along the railroad tracks there. No, not all the trees – just the elms. Paul cultured the fungus, sent it off to the USDA in Beltsville, Maryland, and that was the first confirmed discovery of Dutch elm disease in North America.

All this and more was related to the class by Dave Farrell, from Hudson!. Well done – A.

Since the class will be in New York City and shall at least pass by the Algonquin Hotel, home of the Algonquin Round Table of New York wits, Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker, Harpo Marx and Ogden Nash (at least in tyle), let us finish with Ogden Nash's 1933 quip in *Song of the Open Road* about form and function:

*I think that I shall never see  
A billboard lovely as a tree.  
Perhaps, unless the billboards fall,  
I'll never see a tree at all."*

