

From *Stewardship Notes*, the quarterly newsletter of the Kansas Land Trust

Winter/Spring 2001; Volume 12, Number 1

**KLT & Lawrence Arts Center to Collaborate on
Imagination & Place Conference, October 19 - 21, 2001**

by Rick Mitchell

Poet Robert Kelly, in an essay titled "Hypnogeography," from his 1988 book, *Doctor of Silence*, advanced the idea that dreams can provide a deeper, more complete geography. Kelly called for "all generous persons to record their dreams and when possible to compare them with the real places so that we might have a more complete record of those places, a truer geography, if you will."

The staffs of the Kansas Land Trust and the Lawrence Arts Center and LAC's literary publication, *Cottonwood Review*, embraced Kelly's proposal and determined to begin compiling a dream archive about place. In addition, they have enlisted some of the world's most acclaimed thinkers (including Kelly himself) to examine the recordings of dreams. These documents will constitute the basis for a conference considering the influence of dreams on our perceptions of places. Presenters at the October 19-21, 2001, Kansas Conference on Imagination & Place will be provided with transcripts of dreams from the dream archive and will also rely on their own studies in this area for their presentations to conference attendees. Each presenter will prepare a paper for publication in a special issue of *Cottonwood Review*. Following this publication, conference material will be collected in a book for printing and distribution through a major academic press. The Center for American Places (Harrisonburg, VA) is literary agent for this aspect of the project.

As organizers have formed the idea for the Kansas Conference on Imagination and Place, we have asked ourselves why is it so important to us? One encompassing answer: to increase the odds for survival.

I recently attended a corporate retreat in which the facilitator beseeched the participants to "think outside the box." I considered this characterization of imagination and realized that many people I know who do think outside the box (for some that box is a mere speck on the horizon!), often meet resistance from those who, for one reason or another, are invested in "the box."

What does true "outside the box" thinking entail? We profess that we are interested in imagination and creative thinking. But when change is called for we must ask: who does it threaten and why? And, more to the point of our conference, what generates and inspires imaginative thinking? From where do imaginative ideas come?

To me, imaginative thinking suggests flexibility and the ability to be resourceful when faced with situations in reality. Sometimes these situations involve survival, and they may be either simple and reflexive, like avoiding an accident, or complex and meditative, like curing cancer. In both cases, creative thinking may be required.

The Kansas Conference on Imagination and Place will ask questions about imagination and place. How and why do we think the way we do about the places in which we live?

The world, it seems, gets smaller every day. Increased efficiency in travel and communication have created more awareness of the world's interconnectedness, interdependence and ecological and social integration. When unknown frontiers still lay ahead, attitudes about land often involved dreams of exploration and acquisition. Now, with every continent explored and mapped and inhabitable places growing increasingly crowded, we are thinking about our environment differently. To some extent, notions of space exploration-- both external (to the planets and stars) and internal (through dreams, daydreams and imagination) are now influencing our attitudes about our dwelling place.

New ideas about how to live in places come from these explorations. We learn about what we value, what we require and what we desire. Also important, we push ourselves right up against the questions: What is possible? What is beneficial? What is healthy?

Perhaps no human faculty is as essential to survival as imagination. Human imagination generates resourcefulness, adaptability, creativity and inventiveness. And no realm of imagination is as open, honest and free of restraint as dreaming. In dreams and imaginings lie the seeds of what will be as well as the expression of our fears. The world in which we live, in many ways, is the result of the dreams of our forbears—their imaginings having been brought into reality.

We know that ancient and indigenous cultures placed importance on dreaming. Traditional Native Americans in the past made contact with guiding spirits through their dreams or received signs upon which they based their actions. Their deep appreciation for the sacredness of nature was often celebrated in rituals generated from dream images. For them, mountains could be sacred, not merely elevations in the terrain, and hunting grounds were used judiciously out of respect for nature's animal spirits. Many Native peoples today offer to share this way of understanding.

We have often seen the relationship depicted of imagination/dreaming and land/place in the work of prominent visual artists from Kansas. To a certain extent our sense of identity, as Kansans, comes from the poetic distillation of imaginings with the features and characteristics of our land. But accomplished painters are not the only ones whose dreams define a place. Everyone experiences "place," geographically, as the unique integration of environment and thought.

Conference organizers have been encouraged by the enthusiasm expressed by professionals from many disciplines for a conference on this theme. Scholars and writers interested in place, planning, land use, the relationship of mind to place and the relationship of dreaming to our thoughts about place, have agreed to participate.

Conference presenters and some of their published works are: Edward Casey, philosopher, professor at SUNY Stony Brook, and author of *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* and *Getting Back into Place*; Cecil Giscombe, poet, associate professor of English, Pennsylvania State University and author of *Into and Out of Dislocation*; Denis Cosgrove, cultural geographer, Von Humboldt Chair in Geography at UCLA, and author of *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*; Barbara Tedlock, professor of anthropology at SUNY Buffalo and editor of *Dreaming: Anthropological and Psychological Interpretations*; Richard Schoeck, historian and poet, retired professor who taught at the universities of Colorado, Washington, Toronto and at Notre Dame, Cornell, Yale, Princeton and Corpus Christi College, Oxford; Soren Larsen, PhD. candidate in sociocultural anthropology at the University of Kansas who has conducted ethnographic fieldwork among the indigenous Cheslatta T'en of northwest Canada; Denise Low, poet, professor of English and Native American Studies at Haskell Indian

Nations University and author of *Spring Geese*, *Starwater*, *Tulip Elegies*, and *Touching the Sky*.

A feature of the conference will be a special exhibition produced by the Kansas Land Trust in the Lawrence Arts Center's gallery titled *Imagination and Place: Three Perspectives* which will present the work of Kansas artists, Jane Voorhees, Gesine Janzen and Ronald Michael. Each of these artists considers the importance of place in a unique way and in media ranging from painting to printmaking and ceramics. The exhibition, curated by Lawrence landscape artist Lisa Grossman, will open on October 5th and run through the conference dates.

Additional activities offered in conjunction with the conference will be a writing workshop entitled "Write from the Earth," conducted by Lawrence writer and teacher Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, and a cognitive mapping drawing workshop entitled "Mapping Home," conducted by Soren Larsen.

Tickets for the conference are available for \$25 through the Kansas Land Trust and the Lawrence Arts Center. Only 300 tickets will be sold. Tickets entitle the purchaser to participate in all activities of the conference. To reserve tickets using Visa or Mastercard, call the Lawrence Arts Center at 785-843-2787 or E-mail: lacaia@sunflower.com. For information about the conference, call the Lawrence Arts Center or the Kansas Land Trust.

Rick Mitchell is KLT Board of Directors Secretary and Director of the Gallery and Special Programs of the Lawrence Arts Center.