A Farm That Grows Sunsets

Our art critic, Sparrow, visits a farm in upstate New York which stands as a visionary science and cultural center.

By Sparrow (mosgoogle)"The sky is everything," says Daniela Bertol. "The sky is what surrounds us. The sky is the Universe!" We are sitting in her dining room at Sunset Farm, in Claverack, New York, drinking tea. Her Dell laptop is open, to illustrate her ideas. Daniela has liquid eyes, an Italian nose, and shoulder-length brown hair, tied back. She looks less like a visionary than an indulgent mother. Her English is accented, but utterly fluent.

The sky was the first teacher of geometry, and Daniela loves geometry.

"These are the Noon Columns," she says, pointing to a photograph on the laptop. It shows 12 wooden posts, each 12 feet high, aligned with the edge of her house, extending south. At noon, on a bright day, the shadows of the Noon Columns form one continuous dark line. Daniela has tricked the sun and its shadows into completing her artwork.

"Here are the columns in snow," Daniela says, clicking on a new picture. Now the black line of noontime is even blacker! Snow is exactly like a canvas.

Suddenly, I hear a cacophony in the foyer. I realize this is Daniela's phone ringing.

"What's your ringtone?" I ask.

"It's The Clash," she replies.

"What song?"

"'Rock The Casbah.'"

When I first reached this house, I noticed a pile of white and red plastic on the deck. It looked like 20 pennants from a football game heaped together. When she came out, Daniela explained, "This is another spiral. It has not yet been installed. I'm a little behind schedule."

She lifted up the plastic ribbons, and pointed out a metal pin. "This is the axis mundi," she said, with a smile. (Literally, this means the "axis of the world" -- the mythological place where Heaven and earth join.)

"Where will this spiral be?" I asked.

"In the middle of the pond."

She pointed down the long straight pebbled path, which passed between two high hickory trees. Beyond, I saw a small circular body of water. In the pond was a dock aligned with the pebbled way. This path ran perfectly east-west.

On the equinox, the sun rises directly above this path.

Above us was the Sunrise Trellis, which also functions as a sundial. It is simply a row of wooden posts eight feet high, joined above by beams.

Standing under it, I felt a happy humming in my mind, as if my head itself was expanding. The Sunrise Trellis is the architectural equivalent of a drug.

Daniela led me along the path, which was composed of white pebbles, and extended down a gentle hill. There was a slightly sweet smell in the air, from some flowers -- perhaps wild thyme? The sky was a troubled gray.

I followed Daniela amid the rustling of the pebbles. Past the twin hickories, we turned left, onto another path. Now we were heading due north. At the end of this pathway stood a rectangular structure made of three red pine logs taken from the land.

"This is the Meditation Gate," Daniela announced. "Meditation is a transitional state, when your mind starts focusing into something -- could be your breath, could be your thoughts, could be a mantra. At this point, we start focusing on this place, on the environment."

"It looks like the Greek letter Pi," I observed.
"I never thought of that," she answered.

We backtracked on the north-south trail, then continued forward 30 feet. Now we were beside "Time Helix" -- a sculpture built of 54 wooden boards, designed by Daniela. "Time is often portrayed as a spiral," Daniela explained. "It's linear, since it goes forward, but at the same time it cycles -- at least, astronomical time. Astronomical time is given by the earth revolving around the sun, seasons, days. These are all cycles. If you make a diagram of a circle -- the cycle -- and a line, which is the arrow of time, you get a spiral. So a spiral is the shape that best expresses time in space."

Walking up to the wood helix, I saw that it was swaying slightly.

"Are you familiar with Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane?" Daniela asked. "For me, it is one of the most meaningful readings. Because it's about settlement, as it was done by traditional people -- by our ancestors -- and there are some common motifs, whether from Hindu, or Native American, or Africa. Settling in a place, according to Eliade, was the recreation of a cosmogony [a theory of the creation of the Universe]. So it was finding a very special place and creating a point which was connecting, ideally, with the center of the earth; and that was often done with human or animal sacrifices. They erected a high stake, which was the axis mundi.

"And to me -- aside from the human sacrifices! -- it's very interesting. You're trying to find your own connection with your center. Connecting with the place, and finding your axis mundi, which is how you start creating your world."

Next, we visited the pond. This was meant to be a spiral, but the landscape -- or perhaps the excavator -- were not cooperative. Now it almost exactly resembles a heart, as if the Universe were telling Daniela (quoting W.H. Auden):

... though truth and love
can never really differ, when they seem to,
the subaltern should be truth.

The pond was deep blue -- a dye prevented the growth of algae. Around the periphery of the water, small stakes had been driven into the ground, outlining the intended spiral.

Daniela and I walked back up the white-pebbled path to the house, then turned left. She took me to a squared-off spiral walkway, still under construction. We walked in silence, following the path of the spiral, from the outside inward. Finally, I reached the middle of the middle -- and felt the victory of being at the center of a private cosmos.

Before I visited, Daniela sent me an e-mail with directions. At the bottom was the quote: "To accomplish great things, we must not only act, but also dream; not only plan, but also believe." - Anatole France

But what exactly does Daniela believe?

Daniela was born in Rome, on Via Francesco Sivori, a 15 minute walk from St. Peter's Church. She attended a five-year program at the University of Rome to become an architect. Her thesis was on tensegrity structures, which were developed by Buckminster Fuller. "Buckminster Fuller was another spiritual leader," Daniela told me, laughing. "In a certain way, Buckminster Fuller was similar to the Renaissance, because he had the same holistic approach to life."

Tensegrity -- short for "tensional integrity" -- refers to structures where "push" and "pull" are balanced, such as a geodesic dome.

Daniela was an early computer artist, making images of three dimensional geometrical solids. In 1985, her work was shown at the Cinque per Cinque Gallery in Rome. That same year, in a Roman nightclub, she met David Foell, an American architect studying in Italy. Soon after, she returned to the United States with David. Though she barely spoke English, she went on to write two books: Visualizing with CAD (1994) and Designing Digital Space: an Architect's Guide To Virtual Reality (1996).

Daniela and her husband bought 60 acres in Claverack in 1999. The land was so overgrown, the real estate agent didn't want to show it to them. They built the house in 2000-01. David and she designed the house together.

In 2002, Daniela had a major skiing injury, breaking her femur. She spent six weeks in a wheelchair. After that, Daniela became more involved in yoga, which she had done sporadically for years. She pursued a certification as a yoga teacher.
instructor at the Integral Yoga Institute in New York City. Now Daniela performs yoga daily. She meditates on yantras and mandalas -- symbolic images that summon subtler levels of mind. She also practices walking meditation.

Few people, when they buy a piece of land, see it as an invitation to create a cosmogony. Daniela's creation myth is a theory of spirals. In bubble chamber experiments, subatomic particles make spiral shapes. DNA is a double spiral. And 78 percent of galaxies are spiral. (Daniela is influenced by the Charles Eames movie "Power of 10," in which each image is 10 times larger than the last.)

And how many people search for the axis mundi in Claverack, NY?

Sunset Farm combines several disciplines: art, architecture, horticulture, clock-making, meditation, astronomy. It represents Daniela's dissatisfaction with the immaculate perfections of computer art. She wished for her geometric patterns to escape the computer screen and merge with the real world of forest and sky. In doing so, she became part of what Terence McKenna, the psychedelic prophet, called the "archaic revival" -- a return to the practices of the Druids, the Aztecs, the Dravidians. Daniela's modern structures revive ancient sky-worship.

She thinks the way the builders of Stonehenge thought.

In erecting her archaic contemplation-structures, Daniela also encountered numerous obstacles. There are no straight lines in nature; the earth fights geometry. Something there is that doesn't love a spiral. The meddling wind blows her perfect pebble path awry; grass grows around her Noon Columns. But she welcomes the collaboration.

Sunset Farm is an event waiting to happen. Daniela hopes to bring in dance troupes who will use the sculpture-landscape as a backdrop for choreography. She plans to build an observatory, where children and other curious students will come to examine the stars.

And every moment, Sunset Farm changes. It is in artwork in collaboration with the sun, the clouds -- and at night, the stars. On an overcast day, with no shadows, it has one meaning. In snow, it has another. At sunset, a third meaning. And for a pilgrim, standing before the Meditation Gate in expectation, it conveys holiness.

Living in America, we have no experience of the Renaissance -- although the European colonization of our land was a direct outgrowth of Renaissance thought. But for Daniela, who grew up a stone's throw from the Sistine Chapel, the Renaissance is a personal guide. There is something of the sketchbooks of Leonardo da Vinci in her project -- the unity of Divine geometry, physics, and the human form.

For more information, see www.sky-spirals.org

Sparrow's book, Yes, You Are A Revolutionary! is available at www.softskull.com. His recent interview about the history of Punk is at www.sanderhicks.com