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'burg Blogs »

Big, slippery words: “sustainable and authentic”

Posted [August 15, 2012](#) at 10:18 am by [Andy Fairbanks '12](#)



The historic Williams House "vernacular architecture"

My first introduction to travel writer Herb Hiller was a book that Professor Gary Mormino suggested, *Highway A1A: Florida at the Edge*.

The second time, I met him and filmmaker Caroline McKeon in the Snell House (home to USFSP's Honors Program and Florida Studies programs). Hiller and McKeon were planning a conference, *Sustainable and Authentic Florida*, which is scheduled for October 17-19 in nearby Anna Maria Island.

After discussing their conference plans with Mormino and Florida Studies Program director Chris Meindl, we all strolled down the street for lunch at Kahwa, a great local coffee shop.

Walking and talking with Hiller, it became clear that we have much in common. Besides similar environmental and travel ethics, we also share a fondness for what Hiller calls “authenticity” of local experience, though I'm still bending my mind around what that term actually means in this context.

Descriptors like “unique” and “place-based” barely scratch the surface. Deep connections with local ecosystems and economies (e.g., “mom and pop” businesses) are certainly implicated.

Perhaps embracing authenticity means fostering historical and cultural continuity, like vernacular architecture, but I also hope that it can be open to diversity and the global exchange of ideas.

(Free market intellectualism ought to be a pillar of the information age, no?)



Green is everywhere. Photo: Tim Hipps, U.S. Army

“Sustainable” is a similarly slippery word. Now that it’s trendy to be “green,” it gets my hackles up when such adjectives are mis- or over-used. Yet these are conversations we need to be having across all disciplines.

The three pillars of sustainability – environment, economy, equity – are complex and demanding of thoughtful inquiry. Engaging “Sustainable and Authentic Florida” is doubly so.

I’ve kept in touch with Hiller and McKeon since our first meeting and they’ve enlisted me as a participant and blogger for the upcoming conference. It promises to be an intriguing event, a continuation of my Florida Studies experience as well as food for thought on my gap-year travels.

About the blogger



I just graduated (May 2012) with an MLA from the Florida Studies Program. Perhaps I'm biased, but I think it's the most interesting graduate program in the state. My thesis is titled "The Good, the Bad, and the Garbage: The Making of Modern Florida Solid Waste Policy." Before I commit to a job or further study, I am taking a gap year to explore places around the world that have long captivated my imagination