NATURE LOST IN THE HEART OF COMMERCE

For years, I've known how it feels to be completely enveloped in nature. Last week, during a visit to downtown Chicago, I learned how it feels to be completely absent from nature.

This epiphany happened in the structural core of the Merchandise Mart, the largest commercial building in the world. Rising 25 stories tall and hulking over two city blocks, it contains 4.2 million square feet of space. This is 20 times the capacity of the Connecticut Convention Center. I was there to attend the 22nd annual National Lakes Conference, sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Lake Management Association and the Chicago Botanic Garden. Though the conference was enjoyable and successful, my brain got caught in a tug-of-war between the content of our discussions (the proper management of nature) and their location, a concrete citadel dedicated to conspicuous consumption.

While leaving my house in Storrs, I listened to a few notes of a bird's song before reaching my car. That's when I began losing touch with the natural world. I traveled by auto to Bradley Airport, by shuttle to the terminal, by foot through the maze of security and departure gates, by plane to Chicago, by elevated train through the urban canyons of the city, by foot through a seemingly endless gauntlet of luxury shops, and by elevator up 12 floors to the hotel and conference center. Now deep inside this "city within a city," I stepped across the hall into a darkened meeting room.

There, in a cocoon of synthetic wallboard, ceiling tile and carpet, America's top lake managers were previewing the EPA's national lake assessment, a mixed bag of good and bad news. Scientists armed with field data demonstrated that water quality and wildlife diversity depends on maintaining a largely natural shoreline: those where aquatic plants are left free to grow, where boulders and logs are left to render the habitat more complex, and where the riparian edge was buffered by overhanging trees and herbaceous growth.

The keynote speaker was a landscape architect, discouraged by owners who prefer large, perfect lawns running right to shorelines hardened by edges of cement, steel and timber.

Chicago may be the most completely built-up place on the planet. In this otherwise horizontal world, everything except Lake Michigan to the east was constructed by humans for humans. This includes some of the most amazing architecture in America. Topping that list is the Sears Tower, the tallest skyscraper in the United States. It opened in 1973 to hive the 3,500 worker bees at the headquarters of Sears, Roebuck and Co., then the world's largest retailer.

But in the modern era of big-box asphalt and Internet shopping, it's become an icon of failure, sold to a British insurance broker. Why was it built so unnaturally high? To give the largest corporate titan the tallest erection? To add to the glut of empty office space? To give Chicago citizens and visitors the chance to see beyond the edge of the grid of street after street?

The Merchandise Mart, the self-proclaimed "epicenter for high design and luxury goods," has no interest in you being able to see beyond the city. Instead, it wants to smother you inside it so deeply that you completely lose touch with reality. For example, in the Bible, Jacob's pillow was made of stone. But in our Mart hotel, the choice was between four kinds of fluff from a pillow menu. That was a luxury and a decision I could have done without.

The Mart may have been appropriate during the late 1920s when it was being constructed. But today, it signifies much of what's wrong with America, being hyper-sized, hyper-urban and visited by shoppers in search of overpriced, unnecessary things.
On my way back to the airport, I saw a bobcat prowling the tawny grass in the right-of-way below the elevated train. That glimpse gave me hope that someday America will come to its senses and return to a more sustainable path.