

The term “true north” brings many things to mind: different “types” of north (such as grid, magnetic, and celestial), the direction of zero degrees on the compass, the color (or rather lack therein) of white, purity, truth, and many more of course, though first and foremost it is “the” cardinal direction. That is to say, it is the direction from which all others are measured. When one orients oneself, it is done with regard to true north. When the designer assigns directionality to a plan or a site, it is (generally) done with respect to true north. When creating a map, the cartographer measures all things off of true north; even the other types of north.

Magnetic north is the direction of the earth's magnetic pole, and the north seeking needle of a magnetic compass will point directly towards this pole when not under the influence of metallic interference. The pole, first located in 1831 by English explorer Sir James C. Ross can be currently found at approximately 78N,104W (in the Queen Elizabeth Islands of northern Canada). Depending upon one's location on the planet, this pole will vary with respect to true north, but it is always referenced from true north in the form of magnetic declination (plus or minus “x” number of degrees). Magnetic north also varies with time as the pole slowly migrates over spans of decades in a wide arc. Magnetic north is infinitely useful to explorers of all types, outdoorsmen & women, navigators, pilots in air, on land, and sea, to name just a few, but it would be practically meaningless to us without the reference of true north. Though one should be careful not to confuse magnetic north with grid north.

Grid north is - very simply put - an assumed datum that is superimposed on a plot, or more appropriately, a plat of land. The grid is then used for reference situationally by the agency or sub-agency which superimposed it to begin with. It is a common tool often used by the US Department of Defense, as well as N.A.T.O. for ease of navigation and to allow many users to know with *exacting* precision where a particular locale is...down to the nearest centimeter. The United States Geological Survey also commonly superimposes a grid north onto their topographical maps (for much the same reason that our military assets do), though the accuracy possible in location is substantially lower simply because of scale. Similarly to magnetic north, grid north is measured from true north in the form of a horizontal clockwise angle, and this “declination” will generally be located in the map legend on the same table with other declinations. The common link is again, true north.

But what exactly is true north? From a terrestrial standpoint, true north is the azimuth of the north pole (with the coordinates to that azimuth being, 90N, 0W)...in the skies, true north is located by Polaris (roughly – as it fluctuates). While the pole is the most stable locator of true north, anyone reading this for about the next several hundred years or so will be more than safe in finding this deflection by

locating Polaris in the northern skies (it can be found in a number of ways, but the easiest is to locate the constellation Ursa Major – also known as the “big dipper” – once the observer has found Ursa Major, locate the two stars in the “dipper” portion – as opposed to the “handle” portion – and form a straight line between these two points in the sky, continuing this imaginary line visually as if in the direction “pouring out”, and the very next celestial object one will come across will be a rather faint and unassuming star – that is Polaris). As dim as it may be however, it has always been of very real value to many peoples.

The importance of true north is not a new concept, nor is it one that is limited to western cultures. True north has been a potent influence among peoples in all areas of life and culture as far back as ancient Mesopotamia, though one of the most notable signs of its influence can be found in the pyramids of early Egypt. The orientation of all of the pyramids that we know of are situated with respect to the heavenly bodies, and all of these are measured off of celestial (true) north. How much of an impact is that culturally? What did these ancient designers believe this direction of directions to be? It would be interesting to speculate on how they may have viewed the significance of an apparently unmoving star, but how much more appropriate to postulate how that same celestial body / cardinal direction could influence our own designs today.

In generic terms, as designers, we are concerned about *all* of the cardinal directions. We want to know not only what in our creations will be bathed by the cool northern light, but also what may be scorched by the direct rays to be found in the southwest in late summer...or the nourishing rays coming in from the east on those wonderfully pleasant fall mornings around the autumnal equinox in the mid latitudes of the northern hemisphere. But these are not so much design inspirations, as they are design influences...controlling factors...regulating criteria if you will, that are integral parts and pieces of every “program”. How then are we to take and find *inspiration* in the cardinal direction of true north?

The answer, I believe, may be found in the *concept* of true north much more so than the *reality* of what it is. The concept implies purity. It implies *truth*. It conjures images of the essence of something with all of the extraneous elements cast aside; with the lies and ambiguity of willful or forceful construction discarded and thrown asunder. True north as a concept brings honesty into the frame. The designs of Louis Kahn, and Mies van der Rohe spring to mind. Structures that speak to the soul of their unadulterated nature. Buildings that simultaneously allow one to be at peace with all, as well as awed & wonderstruck by the majesty of something so chaste. Designs that the bricks are happy to call home as Kahn may have put it.

So. We find that the impact of true north can extend beyond its massive boundaries...and can perhaps even touch our very souls.