

Promoting the “Ecovillage Design” Part of the Ecovillage Design Education

Posted by E.C. Mare – 19 January 2010

I have to admit, I’m quite flabbergasted when I hear people remarking that there is no room for designing ecovillages in the Ecovillage Design Education. Isn’t that a bit like saying there’s no room for transitioning towns in a Transition Towns workshop?

I recently attended a Curriculum Development Symposium in Sao Paulo. At the time, there was a very interesting dialogue underway on the GEESE list concerning the relative importance of including “Ecovillage Design” as an integral component of the Ecovillage Design Education curriculum. At one point, I heard one of the respondents exclaim, “Very few of my students are interested in learning how to design ecovillages.” Upon hearing this, my doctoral student-trained ears perked up, because I know that “very few” is not sufficient data upon which to make informed decisions. Keen to learn just what the numbers might be, I conducted an informal survey right there in the circle of Brazilian educators at the Symposium. With 22 people present, I asked, “How many here would like to live in an ecovillage someday?” Eight people raised their hands. I then asked, “Of those people who wish to live in an ecovillage, how many want to participate in *designing* that ecovillage?” The same eight hands were raised. Eight out of twenty-two is 36%; yet, if you count May East, who has lived in an ecovillage for years, and me, who wishes to design *many* ecovillages, then the resulting numbers are 10 out of 22 – *almost 50%!*

Changing the choice of language a little, I then queried, “How many people here wish to live in a ‘sustainable community’ some day?” *Every single hand was raised* amidst the clamor of whooping and hollering and cheering! I forgot to ask, “How many people who want to live in a sustainable community would also like to participate in *designing* that community?” Perhaps an oversight, but how can you get around it – the design part that is?

Design is the practice whereby imagining humans transform vision into reality.

Design, at its most elevated, is the process for bringing forth new worlds.

Ecovillage Design is the four-dimensional practice of creating human-scale, full-featured settlements that are beneficially integrated into Nature, optimize human health, and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future – with multiple centers.

This last definition sounds like the over-arching formula for a ‘sustainable community.’ There doesn’t seem to be any resistance to that notion.

I was also very interested to discover that among the Brazilian educators present, there were already *two ecovillage projects currently underway*. One was in the state of Sao Paulo. It

sounded like an ecovillage for middle-class professionals: comfortable, smart, along the lines of a Crystal Waters. The other ecovillage-in-process – poetically named TerraUna – is located north of Rio de Janeiro. This one sounded a little more experimental, leading edge, a place for social, economic, ecological, and spiritual innovators.

While very excited to discover that there were two ecovillage projects currently underway from among this select group of Brazilian educators, I also got the distinct impression that neither one is engaged in what practitioners would call a ‘design process.’ By that I mean neither one is engaged in a formal methodology whose purpose is to bring out the very best of possibilities, optimizing the opportunities, resources, and potentials of the respective sites and populations. I would venture to say that, although some of these educators have been teaching Ecovillage Design Education courses for years, none seems to be fully prepared to do a comprehensive design for an actual ecovillage; that is, it seems that the cumulative practice of “Ecovillage Design” has somehow been overlooked in the EDEs run in Brasil.

This could turn out to be a tremendous missed opportunity, for TerraUna, in particular, is a high visibility project. Apparently, most of the 70 graduates of Rio de Janeiro’s first EDE (last year) want to be a part of TerraUna; yet, without a knowledgeable and disciplined design process, the very real likelihood is that what they’ll get is just another random assembly of dysfunctional placements, wasted energy flows, and missed opportunities – the same sort of chaos that prevails in the rest of the built environment (you should see Sao Paulo!). If TerraUna could come out with a masterful plan, a well-thought-out, high quality, comprehensive ecovillage design – something proud to place on the opening page of the website – then a welcome precedent would be set for the proliferation of more ecovillages in Brasil. If TerraUna should stumble and fall into the chaos of development without design, then the chances are that the on-looking enthusiasts will become disheartened and may look for the fulfillment of their dreams elsewhere.

I think it is possible that there are GEESE out there who do not yet appreciate the value of a good, high quality design. The outcome, the final product of a knowledgeable and disciplined ecovillage design process is a collection of visual representations – site plans, diagrams, elevations, renderings, sketches, charts, tables, lists, etc. These visual representations become the communication media by which to demonstrate and explain the inherent visions of the project. The visual representations as communication media can then be shown to interested parties: planners, government officials, investors, bankers, engineers, foresters, architects, wetland biologists, people interested in joining the project, other ecovillages, etc. Without the visual representations – the *designs* – prospective ecovillage developers would be left with the clumsy position of trying to explain their vision in mere words – and we’ve all heard the expression “a picture is worth a thousand words.” The truth is, you can try to explain all day what your vision is, yet you can never be quite sure if the receiving party is getting what you meant. If you are able to show a picture of what you mean, however, especially a well-conceived, well-thought-out diagram – *a comprehensive ecovillage design* – then the communication starts to flow; ideological boundaries dissolve and then the communicators can

speak in terms of real creative possibilities, not hindered by obstructions or resistances based on faulty or incomplete understanding. I think all this is true for retrofitting as well as for new development.

I learned all this while working with a developer here in Cascadia. We were proposing several ‘sustainable community’ development projects, mostly infills. The communication media *required* by decision-makers were site plans, elevations, conditional use permits, and numerous studies. In this part of the world, at least, it is fanciful to think that you can push through an innovative project like an ecovillage without going through the planning process step by careful step – and, I might add, an innovative project like an ecovillage is going to cost a whole lot more than standard development, just because each new innovation will require a separate study.

And so the question arises, “Does the world really need more ecovillages?” I think it would be very useful to take another survey to answer that question (and I may do that). Maybe it depends on what you mean by “ecovillage?” What if the question was worded differently: “Does the world need more *sustainable communities*?” Would there be any resistance to that? Sustainable communities can come in many forms: ecovillages; urban villages; ecobarrios; community education campuses; the retrofit of existing villages, suburbs, towns, and cities; neighborhood redevelopment; favela restoration; education, healing, or retreat centers; etc., etc., etc. Whatever the outward form or context, I’m sure about one thing: *any sustainable community development project will benefit immensely by beginning with fundamental ecovillage design principles*; and where is the best place in the world to learn fundamental ecovillage design principles if not from the educational arm of the Global Ecovillage Network – Gaia Education? I thought that was the purpose of the Ecovillage Design Education curriculum: to promote the sustainable solution “Ecovillage Design” as a function of the four dimensions of the mandala.

I’m quite certain that Brasil needs more ecovillages. At the Symposium, I had some very interesting discussions with Professor Miguel Sattler, from a university in Porto Alegre. Professor Sattler is doing his best to introduce holistic, systemic thinking into his post-graduate urban planning, architecture, and agronomist students. As we discussed current trends in sustainable urban theory, we both came to the same conclusion: current extremely high, historically anomalous urban densities are *energy dependent*: during an energy descent scenario, we both predict a ‘reverse migration’ out of the cities and back to the countryside (or in the case of Brasil, to the countryside for the first time!). The sustainable “ecovillage” is perfectly suited to become the prevailing settlement pattern of choice during this reverse migration. This makes the two ecovillage projects currently underway by our distinguished Brazilian educators even more crucial to get done right, cause they may very well become prototypes for future development.

And what about Africa and Asia and the rest of Latin America? Won’t they also experience reverse migration out of unmanageable mega-cities? Dr. Marian Zeitlin’s important pioneering work in Senegal – converting existing villages into ecovillages – may be the first case of preparing for such a population shift. Michiyo Furuhashi already has spoken about the pre-industrial, Edo-era villages in Japan as being ideal sustainable models. And in Korea, Bohyoung Son is presently working with a state-sponsored company to prepare the rural villages for an

influx of retirees from the cities. In recently-colonized North America and Australia, with still plenty of available land, we may very well see the proliferation of the reproducible ecovillage prototypes of Ithaca and Crystal Waters. Europe, already over-settled and with a declining population, probably does not need any more greenfield ecovillage development (Denmark, where ‘ecovillage’ is synonymous with ‘co-housing,’ may be an exception); yet the sustainable re-inhabitation of existing villages and retrofit of urban centers can be – perhaps *should* be – guided and informed by fundamental ecovillage design principles, as outlined in the four dimensions of the Ecovillage Design Education curriculum. I wish to proclaim here loud and clear that on *every* continent the people need more “research, training, and demonstration sites” – *the original ecovillages!* – in North America, one for every city of 200,000 or more.

No my friends, the days of the ecovillage are not yet over; in fact, we may very well be at the outset of a grand new surge. If this is true, the world could use a *legion* of competent, qualified, capable, well-trained and well-informed ecovillage designers. And so I ask once again, where is the best place in the world to get educated in fundamental ecovillage design principles if not at the educational arm of the Global Ecovillage Network – Gaia Education? And where is the best place to begin an education in Ecovillage Design if not at an introductory, 4-week Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) course?

And so the apparent dichotomy of the recent discussion on the GEESE list is easily transcended with a synthesis: not either/or but both/and. The EDE is well-suited as a ‘transition town type’ awareness raising experience *and* it is also a useful introduction to comprehensive, four-dimensional ecovillage design. The way I see it, as Gaia Education continues to evolve, graduates of an EDE may be channeled into two post-graduate options: 1) Community Development Leaders, or 2) Sustainable Community Designers.

We’re already witnessing the manifestation of Option 2 with the spontaneous emergence of a 5th Dimension – the Design Dimension. It seems that Hildur’s original conception of an Integrated Ecovillage Design, situated as the last Module of the Ecological Dimension, has now grown beyond the boundaries of the original mandala into a realm of its own, a realm that includes all 4 Dimensions yet lies somehow outside or above them, operating at a new level. This is the 5th Dimension – sustainable community design at settlement scale.

And where will students go to get this advanced education? One choice is coming up at Wongsanit in February, where an optional one-week Design Studio will be following the four-week EDE. At the Design Studio, we will be simultaneously working on a new ecovillage – a sustainable youth school – *and* doing retrofit design for an existing Thai village. The communication media for both projects will be in the form of numerous visual representations, as outlined in this article. We’ll also be approaching the design work from an ecosomatic, ‘whole body awareness’ perspective, where observation and creative imagination is preceded by body movement, exercises, and/or games. The prospect is to make sustainable community designing a *yogic* practice.