

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES: SOLUTIONS FOR A CHANGING WORLD



“We live in a rapidly changing world that is transforming before our very eyes. Humanity is now being challenged as never before to grow in wisdom, maturity, and understanding. A plethora of deep and pressing concerns is calling for our immediate attention, concerns such as: Earth’s environmental degradation, including the loss of precious topsoil and forest cover, the encroachment of deserts, the depletion of fisheries and aquifers, the loss of habitat and the extinction of species, etc.; the glaring and increasing disparity between rich and poor leading to exploitation, poverty, and the associated regimen of malnutrition and over-population; the disintegration of families, communities, and even entire cultures; unrestrained urbanization resulting in social alienation, displacement, and feelings of disconnection with the natural world; the dimming of a sense of spiritual awareness and purpose; global warming and ozone depletion, etc., etc. And now looming on the horizon is “Peak Oil,” with its coming adjustments and retrofits, including the probability of ongoing conflict over access to remaining energy reserves.”

- from the Preamble to the “Ecovillage Design Education” curriculum

Throughout the globe a nascent, sublime, uplifting movement is stirring: the emergence of Sustainable Communities. From Auroville in India, to Crystal Waters in Australia, from Findhorn in Scotland, to Damanhur in the foothills of northern Italy – a new form of human settlement is being created in direct response to the challenges and opportunities of our time. Sustainable Communities embody the perennial, timeless principles from traditional settlement patterns and lifeways, and then overlay the most appropriate, useful of innovations from the modern era. The result is a thoughtful synergy that includes the best of both worlds.

By ‘sustainable,’ we mean that these communities are being consciously designed in such a way that they may be continued into the indefinite future – for as far along the time horizon as one can imagine. Another way of saying this is that these communities are intended to be ‘self-reliant,’ so that they can not only endure but *thrive* in spite of fluctuations in the environment, the global economy, or various political situations. ‘Self-reliance’ is not quite the same intention as ‘self-sufficiency’ – as if these communities could be islands unto themselves; for real prosperity comes with a network of these sustainable communities, each one contributing its own comparative advantage for the benefit of the whole. Sustainable self-reliance means that *essential* needs can be met internally.

Some of the qualities and characteristics that all these sustainable communities have in common, in varying degrees, include:

- Integration into the natural world, such that a mutually-beneficial relationship is nurtured between the community and its encompassing local ecology.
- Development of an internal economy, such that a range of goods and services can be produced entirely within the community. Some communities even create their own currency.
- Attention to the provisions for a lively social life, where a variety of activities and functions can be shared among neighbors and friends. Social interaction is encouraged *by design* – through the thoughtful arrangement of patterns, processes, and structures in the built environment.
- Greater than usual emphasis on arts and culture, including community-based theatre, music, dance, video, publication, sports, and fine arts – as well as cottage-based craft industries.
- Energy independence using renewable technologies such as solar, wind, micro-hydro, biomass, and hydrogen. Concordant with energy independence is the weaning off of highly unsustainable fossil fuels.
- Measures of food security, such that agriculture, horticulture, aquaculture, permaculture and agroforestry systems are found within the community, and managed by community cooperatives as part of the economic base.
- Community-based health and education services.
- Cross-generational age diversity, including accommodation for the elderly.
- Inclusion of diverse worldviews that can be considered ‘spiritual,’ in that they serve as models, standards, or guides for benevolent, enlightened, virtuous action in the world.

It’s important to realize that there is no doctrine or ideology informing the creation of sustainable communities; similarly, there is no central authority. Each community or group of individuals is free to envision and actualize their *own* version of the preferred superlative life, constrained only by the limitations of their effectiveness in working as a collective. In this sense, sustainable communities are proactively working to bring into reality the living situations they would *choose*, rather than passively accepting conditions that have been passed down to them. Advocates of sustainable community have come to realize, on some level, that the most abundant, fulfilling lives evolve or transpire within the cooperative, value-added synergy of like-minded individuals. These arrangements may, it could be argued, be intrinsic to human nature.

It’s also important to mention that the United States currently is lagging far behind the rest of the world in the implementation of sustainable community models. This could be for a number of reasons: a culture that values rugged individualism, wide open spaces that have yet to be filled in, inordinate wealth, comfort and convenience

leading to, perhaps, a lackadaisical attitude resistant to change. Ironically, it's the United States among all countries that most *needs* to develop genuine sustainable community models. This is because the U.S. was settled in a mad rush of careless, often haphazard development – the vast majority of this development occurring since WWII. The resulting settlement pattern is random and dispersed, lacking any sort of coherency or consistency. The U.S., with 5% of the world's population, uses some 40% of the world's energy to maintain this disarray – a situation that is hardly sustainable, especially with Peak Oil on the horizon.

There is a direct correlation between the nature of the environment in which people do their living and their potentials as human beings. Thus, the random, dispersed, incoherent, energy inefficient pattern of the U.S. has produced a population with the same relative characteristics. There never really was a sense of community – not at the same depth found in the Old World – yet the built environment continues to reinforce the sense of separation, isolation, and alienation. Amid the dysfunctional families and resulting addiction, apathy, co-dependence, and superficial self-esteem, people attempt to fill their emptiness through the acquisition of possessions; yet this strategy can never be satisfying in the long run. What people need is the sense of security, belonging, recognition, and shared commitment that community can bring – *real* community, not the shallow substitute of a suburban subdivision 'community.'

In another beautiful irony, it may be that the Americans' void of community is exactly what propels them to lead the world in the design and development of genuine sustainable community models; after all, the Americans are living in a completely dysfunctional settlement pattern whose severity of disconnection can only grow more acute in the coming era of energy descent. Let us hope that the same high-spirited innovativeness, the same impetus toward "manifest destiny," the same dynamic initiative that led to the rapid subduing of a whole continent can be redirected and transformed into a momentum toward testing and implementing viable living situations that can be continued into the indefinite future. As the most privileged people on Earth, the Americans may have a responsibility for demonstrating to the rest of the world truly sustainable community patterns that can bring out the very best in human nature, and that can serve as models for solutions to the world's most pressing problems. Otherwise, what good was all that wealth – solely for personal consumption?