

What is a Village?

Chapter 1 of the book "The Urban Village: Synergy of Ecology and Urbanism"

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Before jumping right into this new theme of "Urban Village," it will be informative to step back a bit and appreciate the phenomena of "village" more generally, for apparently the adjective "urban" is referring to a certain *kind* of "village." In *A Geography of Settlements*, F. S. Hudson declares:

"[T]here is no clear-cut distinction between a hamlet and a village nor between a village and a town. It is generally assumed that a hamlet is smaller and less compact than a village and that it lacks some of its amenities, just as a village in turn is less built up than a town and is without some of the facilities that a town provides" (p. 35).

To the practicing Human Geographer, then, there is a *typology* of settlements, a classification system based on size, scope, and function. Hudson's typology extends to include *cities*, which are larger than towns, *metropolises*, which are agglomerations of individual cities, and *megalopolises* – vast stretches of the urbanized environment.¹ Sustainable community design groups in Australia have identified settlements even smaller than hamlets as *enclaves* – mere collections of multiple dwellings with their accessory and ancillary units.²

While there may not be "clear-cut distinction," and in some cases there will certainly be overlapping, the reasons for a classification system are not purely academic, for there are distinctive functional qualities associated with the various types – economies and sociologies of

¹ Doxiadis (1968), the originator of the term Ekistics, envisioned a further type of settlement – the *ecumenopolis* – that would be a continent-wide blanket of megalopolises. Such a vast expanse of human construction is not even possible, given ecological constraints, but it completes the theoretical typology.

² The term "enclave" seems to have come into general use with ecovillage groups in northern New South Wales, particularly Nimbin Eco-Village Pty. Ltd. (see www.earthwise.org.au/village).

scale. A village, for example, has greater production capacity than a hamlet, meaning a greater diversity of goods and services can be produced entirely within that system. Similarly, it takes megalopolis-scale development to produce a human artifact as complex as, say, a satellite mapping system. Varying types of settlement patterning elicit varying respective design criteria, and this is fundamental to a systems perspective.

Functional qualities also include potential cultural amenities. Max Lindegger, of Crystal Waters, is fond of saying, “A village is large enough to contain a church; hamlets are too small for churches.”³ This seemingly straightforward statement alludes to the nuanced complexity underlying cultural distinctions among settlement types. How inclusive does a settlement need to be before it can support an opera house or symphony? Could these same functions be consummated within a clustered amalgamation of smaller-scale settlements?

Significantly, Hudson goes on to add:

“A village is more closely related to its immediate surroundings than a town and it more completely typifies the kind of region in which neither manufacturing industry nor commerce are highly significant. In most villages, the majority of the workers are occupied in farming, but it is generally agreed that besides agricultural villages there also exist forest villages, mining and quarrying villages, fishing villages, [etc.]” (ibid).

A picture is developing here of each “village” serving some sort of ‘primary production capacity’ within the encompassing regional society – this capacity usually based on agriculture, or at least complemented with an agricultural component. In this picture, larger regional commerce centers are “towns,” and greater regional commerce and industrial centers are “cities” – although, in the high-tech 21st century, it is certainly conceivable to imagine commerce and even light industry occurring at the human-scale of the “village.”

The characteristic of the village being “closely related to its immediate surroundings” is found universally.⁴ So pervasive is this sense of blending into the landscape that it is definitive:

³ For an overview of Lindegger’s pioneering work in sustainable community design and implementation, including the UN Habitat award winning Crystal Waters, and post-tsunami recovery work in Sri Lanka, see www.ecologicalsolutions.com.au

⁴ See for example: Srinivas (1976), Ransel (1993), Wylie (1957), Brandt (1971), Chance (1984), Boissevain (1980), Fakhouri (1972), Dentan (1968), Beals (1974), Downs (1980), Redfield and Rojas (1934), Fromm and Maccoby

villages are symbiotically integrated into their supporting local ecologies. (Elsewhere I have called them “anthropomorphic outgrowths” of a particular ecology (Mare, 2000a)). This is because villages, at least the traditional variety, grew to maturity in place *organically* over countless generations; that’s what makes them so sustainable – this symbiotic, mutually-beneficial and mutually-defining interconnectedness with their environments.⁵

In an influential book entitled categorically *Villages*, the result of many years of field research, author Richard Critchfield exclaims unequivocally: “villages endure,” and adorns our current discussion with:

“Most villagers have a love of their native land, a desire to own land, an intense attachment to their ancestral soil, a personal bond to the land, a reverence for nature and toward habitat and ancestral ways; there can be an almost organic relationship between a man and a woman, their labor and the land” (p. 342).

In the same section as this passage, other, more socio-cultural characteristics of village life are cited, including: “[T]he family is of central importance and blood ties and kinship have heavy weight;” “[A]ge is respected, tradition and custom binding;” “[T]here is a tacit recognition that while a villager is rustic, he or she has a superior moral code to people in the cities;” “All villagers tend to be skeptical toward organized religion...and toward its priests;” “[V]illagers have little sense of nationalism, but tend to identify themselves with a local region or ethnic group; there is a fear of big cities...the village remains the fixed point by which a man or woman knows his or her position in the world and relationship with all humanity;”⁶ “[F]ear of neighbors’ censure is a much more potent force in holding a village together than government fiat or fear of God;” “[N]eighboring villages invariably have bad reputations;” [T]here is some degree of mutual cooperation; it is understood that each villager has a part to play in an organic

(1970), Blythe (1969), Dube (1967), Yang (1945), or, for that matter, anywhere in the cultural anthropology literature.

⁵ As a testimony to their sustainability, consider this passage from Hudson: “Once established, a village may occupy the same site for hundreds, even thousands, of years. In the Nile valley, for example, most Egyptian villages, including some probably 6,000 years old, stand on low eminences artificially raised above the flood-level by the superimposed layers of old buildings and their rubbish dumps. Many villages in China are undoubtedly 4,000 years old. In southern Italy there has been continuous village occupation since the Bronze Age, in southern France since the days of the Romans and in England at least from Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian times” (p.38).

⁶ While studying with an agronomist in rural France, I was informed: “The people around here tend to identify with their village more so than with the nation.”

whole;" "[T]here is little or no difference in the outward aspect of the houses and clothing of the rich and poor" (pp. 341-45).

This last characteristic of the perennial village really strikes me: As a North American of northern European descent, with comparatively shallow roots, I can only imagine being part of such a deep, organic, eco-social whole – an interdependent collectivity so unified in purpose and identity – that the wealthy choose a modest and egalitarian parity over ostentation. Is this same sort of parity, or at least an attempt at income diversity, a characteristic of the 21st century “Urban Village?” If not, could these novelties really be considered authentic “villages?” Accountability naturally arises when people must meet each other face to face, on a daily basis in a human-scale context, and when production and distribution networks are clearly visible.

Critchfield often repeats the message that all villages share something of a common culture, and closes his book with the proposition:

“History suggests that there may be no adequate substitute for this universal village culture...It just could be the most harmonious way of life for human beings who choose to live in groups” (p. 346).

The Village Design Institute (www.villagedesign.org) notes some additional defining characteristics of villages:

- They tend to be compact, with well-defined boundaries and well-defined centers, these centers usually being some sort of village green, square, or plaza, often with a tree, obelisk, fountain, or statue – something symbolically meaningful to the history of the village – as a focal point. These centers invariably contain a marketplace, the economic hub of the village, usually lined with administrative buildings;
- They tend to be small enough so that everyone can be recognized – there are no strangers – yet large enough so that all essential economic functions – the necessities of life – can be produced or serviced entirely within that habitation system; this makes them very self-reliant in a way the “hamlet” could never be, with a strong sense of collective identity and purpose that starts to disperse at “town” scale;

- Villages tend to maintain their population levels, in a self-organizing way, within the ecological carrying capacity of their encompassing environs – and there are social taboos to compel this;
- Villages, as self-contained organic unities, are capable of enforcing their own laws internally, without the need of a state-sponsored police force; and these laws are consistently derivative of natural laws.⁷
- Individual villages tend to have something distinctive about them – either in custom, speech, or dress – so that when traveling about the region, one’s village of origin can be instantly recognized by others;
- Actual population for a village, taking into account all the above factors, will not exceed 5000 persons; settlements larger than this move into “town” scale. At the lower end of the spectrum, a population of 500 persons is the bare minimum for achieving the social, economic, and cultural potentials of the village; settlements smaller than this move into “hamlet” scale.⁸

In a very insightful section of the *Sustainable Communities* book, Sim Van der Ryn, before introducing a project called “Marin Solar Village,” speaks knowledgeably about ‘village:’

“[P]erhaps the village represents an organic vision of community, because the central theme of village is that of a community directly tied to the productivity of

⁷ One day, while sitting in the market plaza of a large village in the Highlands of Guatemala (San Pedro la Laguna) and learning the local Tzutujil dialect from some youngsters, we were suddenly alerted to a commotion in the crowd at one corner of the plaza. As everybody strained to see what was happening, through the crowd emerged four men carrying a fifth face down. A pair of ‘num-chucks’ was wrapped around each arm and leg of the face-down man. When they got to the administrative building near to where we were sitting, they unwound the num-chucks and threw the man into a brig in the basement. There, clearly visible behind bars at the bottom of some steps, he began to moan and groan. It turns out this man had gotten intoxicated and started some trouble. The four men with num-chucks were vigilantes. The intoxicated man was to learn his lesson with three days of only water in public humiliation. San Pedro la Laguna, because of its relative isolation at the far end of a lake backed by a mountain range, has no state Guatemalan police force; nor has it the need of one. I doubt this intoxicated man will repeat the error of his ways: next step would be *banishment*.

⁸ For a well-researched, multidisciplinary defense of this 5000 optimum number see *Human Scale* by Kirkpatrick Sale. Then, representing the influential Chicago School of Urban Ecology, E. W. Burgess writes in *The City* way back in 1925: “The human community tends to develop in cyclic fashion. Under a given state of natural resources and in a given condition of the arts the community tends to increase in size and structure until it reaches the point of population adjustment to the economic base. In an agricultural community...the point of maximum population seldom exceeds 5000. The point of maximum development may be termed the point of culmination or climax, to use the term of the plant ecologist. The community tends to remain in this condition of balance between population and resources until some new element enters to disturb the *status quo*, such as the introduction of a new system of communication, a new type of industry, or a different form of utilization of the existing economic base.” Interestingly, Plato in *The Republic* in the fifth century B.C. “called for the division of the city into 5040 lots, each housing a citizen – the maximum number Plato felt could participate in face-to-face governance in the public amphitheatre [agora]” (Appelbaum, 1978, p. 1).

the land. The size of a village is usually defined by how far one can walk to outlying fields. *The village is an organism* that literally builds itself and feeds itself and today would also grow or collect its own fuel and energy. In the village, everyone is both a producer and a consumer of goods and services to be sold, exchanged, or given freely. The composition of the village includes all age groups living together, not segregated spatially or by institutions. A village might have from a few hundred to a few thousand people. At the latter size, the village's core is its trading center and stores, also containing the centers of local governance, communication, education and religion, the town square or commons, and places to gather together – in other words, it contains coherence, stability, continuity, sustainability” (1986, p. 57, emphasis added).

All the above characteristics from the past several pages could be considered universal and definitive; that is, they are manifest no matter where and in what time the village – as a primordial social-spatial unit – may appear. Particularly, this idea of the village as an ‘organism’ is worth exploring further.

Lewis Mumford was a prolific writer and scholar who wrote in the transdisciplinary manner being practiced here; thus, his *The City in History* was inherently an ekistic investigation. In this magnum opus, Mumford places “the village” within the context of an historical evolution, and notes:

“The village, in the midst of garden plots and fields, formed a new kind of settlement: a permanent association of families and neighbors, of birds and animals, of houses and storage pits and barns, all rooted in the ancestral soil, in which each generation formed the compost for the next. The daily round was centered in food and sex: the sustenance and the reproduction of life” (p. 13).

Of course he is talking here about the transition to sedentary lifestyles that occurred in the Neolithic period, a period exalted by ecofeminist scholars such as Riane Eisler (*The Chalice and the Blade*) as being the embodiment of the *matriarchy* – a society based on the values of woman- and mother-hood. Mumford goes on to provide quite an eloquent description of the incipient relationship between village and matriarchy:

“Certainly ‘home and mother’ are written over every phase of neolithic agriculture, and not least over the new village centers, at least identifiable in the foundations of houses and in graves. It was woman who wielded the digging

stick or the hoe: she who tended the garden crops and accomplished those masterpieces of selection and cross-fertilization which turned raw wild species into the prolific and richly nutritious domestic varieties: it was woman who made the first containers, weaving baskets and coiling the first clay pots. In form, the village too is her creation: for whatever else the village might be, it was a collective nest for the care and nurturance of the young. Here she lengthened the period of child-care and playful irresponsibility, on which so much of man's higher development depends. Stable village life had an advantage over looser itinerant forms of association in smaller groups in that *it provided the maximum facilities for fecundity, nutrition, and protection...* Woman's presence made itself felt in every part of the village: not least in its physical structures, with their protective enclosures, whose further symbolic meanings psychoanalysis has now tardily brought to light. Security, receptivity, enclosure, nurture – these functions belong to woman; and they take structural expression in every part of the village, in the house and the oven, the byre and the bin, the cistern, the storage pit, the granary, and from there pass on to the city, in the wall and the moat, and all inner spaces, from the atrium to the cloister. House and village...are woman writ large" (pp. 12-13, emphasis added).

At this stage it is enough to assert that the "village" coincides with the matriarchy while the "city" is an instrument of the patriarchy. Will 21st century "Urban Villages" provide context for "the maximum facilities for fecundity, nutrition, and protection?" This remains to be seen. If they don't, could they be considered *real* villages?

I am reminded of the times I have flown over Europe and looked down to see genuine villages scattered over the landscape – their rounded, softly crenellated forms resembling biological structures: neurons or protozoa – their well-defined though permeable 'cellular membranes' being the unencroachable boundaries between house and field. How long has that village assumed the relatively same morphology, neatly conforming to and enhancing its topography, aligned to accept and store the nutrient flows coming down its watershed? It looks like it's embedded right into the landscape as if it had grown into place there from a sprouting seed. For how many generations have the families down there lived on and tilled that one same fertile spot of earth, co-evolving with the flora and fauna and unseen living energies of that one particular special place they call 'home?'



Traditional French Village (Normandy) blended into the landscape, the morphology of millennia.

Photo by EC Mare, 1998

For those who have undertaken the study, the word “village” invokes a very exacting set of responses. The “village” is a very discrete evolutionary phenomenon: it has a certain size and form, a certain function, certain qualities and characteristics that are inherent no matter where in the world or at what time the village may appear.

What then are we to make of this new concept “Urban Village,” for on first glance it appears to be a contradiction in terms: “village” has always been placed in a nature-encoded, pastoral context while “urban” is usually reserved for those artificed, dense concentrations of city cores?⁹ Can these two very distinct – even contradictory – psycho-topo-socio-economic

⁹ From an Urban Geography textbook (Northam, 1975, pp. 6-7) we read: “The sociologist, Nels Anderson, implies that urban or urbanism is a way of life of [humanity] or the condition of [humanity] characterized by certain attitudes, such as transiency, superficiality, and anonymity...Most geographers would accept a definition of “urban” that would essentially state that urban is a locational setting in which (1) the density of settlement is considerably higher than that of the general population, (2) the people in that setting mainly are engaged in nonagricultural activities, not in economic activities normally placed in the primary economic sector, and (3) the locational setting serves as a cultural, administrative, and economic center for a region peripheral to the center in question.”

cultural settlement patterns intermingle, converge, and synergize in one place? Are we to expect some sort of hybrid?

Cause for concern will be revealed in the next section...