

## ECOLOGICAL LITERACY AND URBAN PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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by

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### **My Professional Concern**

We are all aware that the urban development process in Australia is a significant contributor to environmental problems, including pollution and resource depletion. The recent growth in national, state and local initiatives examining the ecological implications of land development has highlighted these concerns. The establishment of the national ESD Secretariat and the subsequent national consultations are reflections of this growing concern.

From the perspective of a practitioner, urban planning and development practices lack an ecological perspective. Little more than lip service is currently being paid to principles of ESD in most major projects. In interdisciplinary planning teams, there is great confusion about ESD, its application, the reliability of the information which underpins (or seeks to underpin) its principles. There is confusion about who should have responsibility for the ecological consequences of decisions about destruction of native vegetation, road widths and materials, use of rainforest timbers, natural drainage systems, density issues and the like.

While the "voice of the community" frequently speaks of ecological concerns, it may communicate to or through ecologically illiterate practitioners.

### **The Research Question to be Explored**

In my current research I am exploring ESD with respect to urban planning and development. How do Australian urban planners and land developers see it? As a professional body how do we avoid it? How can we learn enough (about ecological principles) to address it?

This issue has to do with "confronting the future", while carrying on professionally. I believe that the problem is gigantic; the complexity of the problem is overwhelming. The "experts" don't know what's true. Professionals need information we can trust. We do not know how to "consult" the environment.

### **The Professional and Intellectual Context**

The intellectual context is one of rapid environmental change. How do practitioners respond to change and the challenge of studying the future? We have a poor track record in predicting social and environmental change; we're not very skilled at holistic thinking about complex issues.

### **An Empirical Study: Studying Myself**

Part of my study involves an ethnographic and interpretive research approach. Studying myself as well as my neighbours and professional colleagues, I intend to ask: Why and how are my colleagues approaching (or, more likely, avoiding) these issues? What interventions would assist their learning? What lessons from my "local" ecological situation could inform my professional practice and approaches to more "global" problems? What could be lessons for a changing role for professional organisations such as the RAPI and UDIA in fostering a more ecologically sustainable approach to urban planning and development?

My initial period of field work has just begun. Living in very simple conditions in an ecologically sustainable development for the first stage of my field work (in the Solar Village, Humpty Doo, a 320-acre development outside Darwin which has been operating as an ecologically sustainable community since 1979, relying on bore and well water and alternative energy sources), I am in a position to use an ethnographic approach to observe how I am learning about environmental change. I am able to question how my emerging awareness might aid me in attempting to develop new skills and perspectives for achieving ecologically sustainable development in my work as a planner?

### **A Participatory Session to Help Provide Research Direction**

In this paper I will report on my developing ecological awareness and insights which could inform the research design. I would like to use an interactive approach to explore with members of the audience some questions which concern me at this early stage of my research, including:

- Self-study questions: What should I look for in my own developing awareness?
- Mandate: How to consult members of the planning and development professions to develop a "mandate" for this study?
- Consultant teams: How to address the problems of developing collective ecological literacy among members of teams of professional consultants who work together only for particular projects and do not have any ongoing regular contact where collective learning is fostered?
- Case studies: How to select urban planning and development case studies for further examination: studies of successes as well as less successful projects in terms of implementing ESD?
- Survey research: Appropriate means of conducting research (for example, a survey) with members of RAPI and UDIA. Other research sources.
- Communication: How to communicate the results of my "learning-in-progress" to professional bodies, especially RAPI, to aid in their policy development and education and continuing education programmes.

Because of its exploratory nature, this paper raises only questions and does not offer solutions. I will be asking those who attend this presentation to help to guide my work, to share their experiences and provide suggestions for direction so that this research can make a genuine contribution to planning for ecologically sustainable development in Australia.