VI. Reseñas

Relating People to Climate, or How soon before we will be using a HSUCCC (Handbook for survival in urban corridors under climatic changes)?

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-- Bioclimatic Housing (Innovative Designs for Warm Climates), Edited by Richard Hyde, Earthscan Publications (2008),UK and USA, <earthinfo@earthscan.co.uk> [www.earthscan.co.uk] Fax: +44 (0)20 7387 8998, ISBN: 978-1-84407-284-2. Paperback of 440 pages (20 X 24 cm) of chlorine-free paper, certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.

-- Ecological Context of Development (New Zealand Perspectives),by Marjorie van Roon and Stephen Knight. Oxford University Press(2004),253 Normanby Road, South Melbourne, Victoria, Australia ,ISBN: 0 19 558435 X. Paperback of 340 pages (17 X 24.5 cm).

What do Norman Mailer, Alexander Dubcek, Jimmy Morrison, Bobby Dylan, Neil Armstrong and the miniskirt have in common? It seems to me that the answer is exactly why our environmental crisis is such a hard problem for us to solve now: it is 40 years too late as I am referring to this earlier period of our times, we will all be hearing on radios, watching on T.V., reading in the press this spring of 2008 and beyond it. They were all part of an unheard of since WW2 planetary conscience, from nice legs to landing on the moon, from marching to the Pentagon and writing about it, to singing in Woodstock or Amougie, and addressing Prague on that spring of 1968. Are we today capable to address the world issues beyond the official, yet ineffective approach for minimising the environmental impact of (the hidden agenda for a prioritised) economic growth? Do we run a sustainable society?

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But just in case the reader wishes to cut this down to practical size, we as individual consumers go, we do now know that moving from A to B along our urban corridors, plus what we feed on, plus our shelter. These three items do make up for 80% of all environmental impact in Europe, where I am writing this from. In even more simple terms, it also means that Housing is in fact an issue.

Have Bioclimatic (relating people to climate) issues become part of our cities-related education? Has Bioclimatic post-occupancy evaluation become a strongly suggested post-grad subject in our university Departments? Is Bioclimatic design being taught to First Year students who are now learning how to design buildings?

Richard Hyde (RH) has edited a good book putting together design criteria to reshape existing housing and generate new forms towards a possible sustainable future in the warm weather changes we are already experiencing.

Van Roon & Knight's (VR&K) publication provides one version of the necessary policy context that would make it meaningful to learn bioclimatic design for individual clients, whilst focusing on tackling housing projects, and re-visit slums.

RH manages 334 contributors from 8 countries that include cities such as Tehran, Zurich, Kuala Lumpur, Milano, Kutubedda, Brisbane and Tokyo. He himself provides photos, graphs and schemas, publications, and one of his own designs--built in Queensland, Australia. He realises that setting a sustainable house may necessitate moving back to pre-industrial times in order to draw more strongly on the lessons of the past--but this is not one of his strong points, and this is where VR&K come in. He has us aware of the sun's path, the wind direction, and being thankful for the rain. We feel the cold, the hot-arid, the temperate, and the warm-humid. He stresses how air-conditioning systems are part of the problem (greenhouse gas emissions, not to mention the rising cost of energy we also face, and the blackout fears to add), and has us face instead the challenge of how inventive can we be towards passive cooling systems in our

current place of residence, and how an occupant's behaviour can reduce demands for energy. He is strong on relating Anthropos (you and me) to Nature with Shells in mind. He is weak on Society (see policy and legislation)--this is VR&K ground. He is oblivious of Networks, and so are VR&K--themselves rightly so as their subtitle does identify their perspectives as being NZ proper. He introduces us to quantification of performance, ways to monitor, and on computer simulations. He gives them to us through 19 most useful case studies, almost all from the Far East and the Pacific area. They make use (often innovative) of stairways, roofs-as-shade, wind-catchers, corridors, air wells, shading stems, courtyards, solar chimneys, and more. But although he will identify spaces that are neither exclusively private nor just public (and will rightly insist on user's behaviour), he will not make the connection to the user's activity of communication in such semi-private/public spaces (where VR&K could have come forward with possible examples from their NZ indigenous references, the Maoris--if any).

These case studies take up more than two thirds of the book. I miss the missing examples from Bhutan (now set to pass over to a parliamentary governance--why so?), NZ (for VR&K reasons most certainly), China (see below).You will find most useful the summaries shared in all these cases, such as Site description, Building construction, Economic context, Indicators of sustainability, and more. There are detached individual houses, and some buildings. In 4 cases we get detailed information, 2 are bigger scale, 2 provide us with thermal comfort well assessed. All but one are built and date as from 1995 and up to 2005. There is one mention of the owner's extensive experience in sustainability. Another visionary client financed. One other case was based on the strong conviction of the owners. One company did the project for its employees, whilst in another case developers financed so as to demonstrate. One case is clearly a prototype, another was used as precedent, whilst a team of architects' aim was to demonstrate.

We are far from having a clear definition of sustainability: do the 600 (or is it 1000) homes in Malmo/Sweden, or the more than 1,100

properties in Kent/England qualify? Has Britain outlined a set of Sustainability Codes that would keep RH happy, themselves to be imposed as from when, and will people afford to pay for those homes? Meaning, do we have a working policy? Or is it not that the Malmo goes beyond RH, getting its heat from the sea and rock strata, has its vehicles run on the site sewage and refuse producing biogas, and meeting all its electricity needs by looking at the sun and catching the wind? Is Sweden going beyond Malmo?

And I am far from having updated information on Dongtan, new city near Shanghai, on the Yangtze river island of Chongming, construction on the 4,600 hectares having started as from last year. Expected population was 50,000 in 2 years time from now, and 500,000 by 2040. The city aims to be self-sufficient in food, water and energy. Carbon emissions from transportation to come next to zero (motorised vehicles to be powered by fuel cells or electricity).This is a project to monitor, but we already have another one to visit on the Northern China coastline: 99% of Rizhao city's homes in central districts use solar energy for water heaters, light the streets, operate most traffic lights. In suburbia and countryside more than 6,000 houses cook on solar energy, and 60,000 greenhouses get their heat from it how did RH at the university of Sydney miss Rizhao out, since the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation in Australia knows of it?

With China having just right now become the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases (see the hyperbolic expansion of their coal-fired power stations), the question is whether the Chinese themselves can create a geographical-corridor spread of such urban settlements as networks. Rizhao has a 3 m population living on per capita incomes even lower than in most other settlements in their region of the Shandong peninsula. In that socio-economic context, and from what I understand, this successful case had 3 factors coming together: government policy for solar energy research and development, solar panel industry on site, and Rizhao city leadership. These are certainly different from the official position in the western world insisting on (the '3 pillars') integrating Economic Growth, Social development,

and Environmental protection--and asking us how to do it, as with the 2+3/2008 e-Discussion launched by the UN Dept of Economic and Social Affairs and the UNDP. It was for global consulation towards the 2008 Annual Ministerial Review.

A high level political debate on Belgian TV (La Une State Channel,11.30/16/3/08) ran its 4,800 seconds on the 3-pillars-based economic growth. Journalists and politicians put together allowed the environmental concerns 5 seconds, enough for an outsider to say "il faut aussi considerer les habitudes difficiles a changer pour un consomateur". They simply reduced the 3 pillars into 2, practically into 1: 'le pouvoir d'achat' of the consumer as with the European Comission facing the Zakynthos island question: 'do we give the beach to the tourists, or do we keep them out so that the turtles lay their eggs as they always did?' I admit that e-Discussion does much better.

The e-Discussion made clear to me the dead end situation we are in and need to get out of by re-shuffling the cards and re-considering the name of the game:

Even strong believers on the '3 pillars' realise it cannot be done, by saying it can be done, but "of course not simultaneously" (without naming their sequence of priorities, nor how can economic growth be sustainable whilst our stock of natural resources gets depleted). The nowadays missing planetary conscience (what environmental economists would more precisely call Social Capital) was hinted at by the affirmation that our developmental crisis is basically a moral-spiritual one, and the very particular case of Bhutan was referred to more than once the VR&K 5 pages of Glossary serve as a good introduction to Bhutan (a trip I have twice missed): avoidance, bioregion, community, ecological integrity, ecosystem services, eco village, Hapu, low impact urban design, Mauri, Tikanga, Tingo Rangatiratanga. In Te AoTuro (in the natural world, VR&K explain) mauri binds all things to their spiritual source. A key consideration (they add) in Resource Management practices is the maintenance and protection of mauri itself the life source and unique personality of all things animate or inanimate.

Back to myself in Brussels, European Union reports (otherwise very neat) include unclear even conflicting info from one page to the next, such as encouraging us to keep on consuming, but to do it 'in a more sustainable manner'. Or the need to encourage people 'to think carefully about the kind of products (see electrical appliances) they can co-own or share with others'. But do we have the social cohesion of the 1960s to be ready to share? Is our lifestyle sustainable? Why should we consider ourselves developed, meaning all others have to follow our way? If so, the question of the e-Discussion participant Chinese economics professor from Jinan university is valid: "How to persuade people to stop their industrializing process (China is blamed for) chasing after overcoming their poverty?" will conclude by adding that my question to this e-Discussion remained both unanswered and unwelcome by the moderator: "Can anyone provide us with any examples of a 'sustainable development' (in the prevailing context of this debate that takes for granted increasing economic growth), examples on any scale of human settlements be it cities, small cities, megacities, urban corridors, network cities, the urban continuum, whatever other scales however Euclidean or based on a new concept?"

RH speaks of "bioclimatic housing as a path to sustainable urban settlements", whilst recent information on global tourism and housing property investing reports the

Mongolia nomadic population going urban but is it to this planet's advantage to have these people otherwise roaming their varied landscape cram into the capital Ulan Bator for the sake of the property market and our western financial interests?

There are certainly others arguing on the ecosystems and resources that we will be left with post-collapse of economic growth, so as to afford humanity the capacity to recover and reconstitute society as sustainable, and societies re-localised.

One thing for sure, is that in the meantime, living in an inner city area is my handy rule of thumb for sustainability. One direction I

am interested in is the C40 initiative of city mayors that have proved themselves more flexible for change and innovation than the national governments we still don't seem to be able to do without.

The other is my concern for taking a 'passive systems' look into slums ,and also securing a program towards One Laptop Per Child (whether the OLPC itself, or other).It would address almost 40% of the population of China, 80% in Nigeria, 85% for Bangladesh, and much more.

Would a Handbook for sustainable urban behaviour (a HSUB) make a HSUCCC not necessary after all? Let us do it.

Brussels, April 2008

A selection of sites

-- For the Award-winning Austrian S-House, [www.s-house.at]

-- For Innovative solutions of Europe's urban environment,[http://ec.europa.eu/ environment/life/publications/lifepublications/lifefocus/documents/urban_lr.pdf]

-- For Turtles or Tourism?,[www.nmp-zak.org] and [www.medasset.org]

-- For Porto Alegre: A world conference on the development of cities,[www.cmd2008.

com.br]

-- For Engineers setting grand challenges to enhance life, [www.engineeringchallenges.org]

-- For the Housing developments boom in Ulan Bator, [www.mongoliaproperties.com]

-- For one Connection to the e-Discussion, [www.undp.org/fssd]

-- For subscribing to Ecological Internet, [www.ecoearth.info/subscribe/]

-- For more on New Zealand Perspectives contact <m.vanroon@auckland.ac.nz>

and <s.j.knight@auckland.ac.nz>.

-- For C40, [www.40cities.org]