

ECO/SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ('ECD'/'SCD') & THE TRANSITION TO 'MAINSTREAM'

Australia is now recognised to be in the midst of a housing affordability crisis. There has arguably never before been such stress on society, with cost of living assuming two incomes per middle class household, an individualistic, consumption-oriented community with parenting delayed by many in an attempt to establish financial sustainability first – at historically unprecedented standards of living. Social and illegal drug use are taking an increasingly heavy toll on families and individual lives, as individuals succumb to the dissonance between what we were designed for and how we attempt to live. As well as this, the planet is now recognised to be in the midst of an ecological sustainability crisis and the impact of inflation and energy prices is worrying many families and businesses. The time has therefore come to take a cool new look at what conditions actually facilitate a meaningful, happy life for humans, where we can meet our reasonable needs (as distinct from a crazy escalation of consumption and frivolous wants) and a healing and sustainable interface with the ecosystems in which we participate.

The new concept 'sustainable development' was brought to world attention by the Brundtland World Commission on Environment & Development Report "*Our Common Future*", in 1987 and the subsequent 'UNCED' – United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, the late 1980s-mid 1990s. A plan for Agenda 21 has been respected most by Local Government (through Local Agenda 21) than other partners identified to carry the work forward, but they are not in control of all the aspects necessary. Sustainable Development was about mindful development, not constantly increasing expansion ('growth') nor consumption for its own sake.

Preceding and in parallel with UNCED, North American and European academics and urban designers were discovering that a wealth of ecological, social and economic sustainability strategies were being integrated into 'urban ecology', 'green municipalities', 'community development', 'eco-hamlets', Cohousing, 'collaborative housing', 'cooperative housing and other 'co-ops', 'community land trusts' and other projects – in Scandinavia, The Netherlands, Germany, the UK and in the USA and Canada. And to a small extent in Australia. These projects were often driven by groups with a common vision, but others came from local governments and housing departments, planners, architects – alone or in partnership. There was some overlap with the types of people who started up communes in the 1960s, who were often making a political statement, but this time round, the idea of ecological sustainability attracted many thoughtful people from the mainstream, who wanted to explore and demonstrate new ways of living that were looking to restore community in their lives at the same time as 'treading lightly on the planet'. Most were wanting to produce demonstrations: to invent new ways and show how to do it, as well as expecting the benefits for themselves.

The overall Australian development scene is now at approximately the same stage of recognition of the sustainability issue as Denmark was in 1993. The **Kolding Kommune development** suffered many of the initial resistances still common in Australia, especially conflict with public works departments which had difficulty in acting in an integrative manner. In this case the local government was a key driver, so this facilitated uptake of new strategies.

The New Haven (SA) step-up project of the **Multi-Function Polis** in Adelaide in 1994-8 was designed to expose the local industry to sustainable design concepts. Elements it included were:

- Common trenching of utility services
- On-site storm water management with streets as collectors, black water treatment and near-site recycling
- Many other ESD strategies then new to the development industry, even negotiating *Green Mortgages* with Bank SA, although residents never took these up. See **CaseNewHaven**

In Scandinavia, the Netherlands and the UK (probably others), one sustainability strategy has been to encourage experimentation, setting up design competitions and 'eco parks' where building codes could be loosened and self-builders and others allowed to try new approaches. While Australia has had a few demonstration projects, usually on a one-building scale and implemented

by NGOs, it would be good to see a trial of relaxation of statutory specifications in favour of principle-based, functional standards, a frequent recommendation of entrants to the Jerrabomberra Valley (ACT) National Ideas Competition (OECD Ecological Cities project) in 1994. This would leave designers and developers free to decide how those functions would be achieved. Aldinga Arts-EcoVillage has found the absence of statutory demands a blessing, as it has By-laws stricter in many ways than local government, and under Community Title is in charge of most of its own utilities infrastructure. Creativity in housing design is encouraged.

Berkeley architects McCamant & Durrett first experienced (in Denmark), named, then wrote about, publicised and implemented Cohousing, then Senior Cohousing, importing it to the USA and supporting the Study Group approach to community design and development first devised for Senior Cohousing by Henry Nielsen in 1995. Their books 'Cohousing' (McCamant & Durrett with Hertzman 1998) and 'Senior Cohousing' (Durrett 2005) are the recognised 'bibles'. These people have pioneered a model of Cohousing driven by professionals, where they come in as advisers and service providers to existing groups, or they may advertise for expressions of interest and then run their programmes with those who respond. Muir Commons in Davis, California, was their first Cohousing community, set up within a normal housing estate and having a substantial affordable component.

There are now many other helpful books on Cohousing, many in story form. ScottHanson & ScottHanson (2005) provide a highly practical manual on Cohousing written for groups wanting to explore the ins and outs of Cohousing development, from a community perspective (eg what can a developer do for you, what balance of responsibilities and risks should or could there be, what kinds of people are attracted to Cohousing, how much land you need, how to design housing etc). It would be a mistake to undertake Cohousing development without reading at least these, and visiting several real communities. There are many potential candidates in Australia (see [LINKS](#)).

Meltzer's book (2005) entitled "Sustainable Community: Learning from the Cohousing Model", Trafford Publishing, USA. <http://www.trafford.com/04-2802/> (print on demand) demonstrates very clearly after 10 years of research into 12 recently-developed Cohousing communities in Canada, USA, NZ., Australia & Japan, that ecological sustainability and community empowerment are 'inexorably linked'. It is no longer accurate to speak of EcoVillages being about sustainable lifestyle and Cohousing being about social togetherness. Under current conditions of concern about climate change and ecological sustainability, the existing trend for Cohousing to also honour 'eco' can be expected to strengthen. Indeed, we need community empowerment if we are going to succeed at sustainability.

As new approaches to Intentional Community are invented by developers to take account of the reality of their practical situation, it is critical to remember the sustainability objectives, which include a radical shift in design for resource minimisation in setup (eg >10 star passive solar housing, grey water reuse) and reduced cost of living by sharing and demand managing resources ongoing, enriched by the mutual social benefits of living in community. If these are compromised, the outcomes increasingly approximate 'why bother?'

As a developer you may come across clients with quite different motives, and who may have little understanding of what is involved, even though they may like the idea. These people may well respond to your advertisement or survey, an action research process and engagement opportunities. Such processes help select out those unsuited, as does asking for staged financial contributions to design processes. There is more of this with Cohousing groups, and rightly so, as they have to live together at much closer quarters long term. But EcoVillages enjoy a lot of togetherness also.

In the experience of traditional eco-communities, there is a fair bit of 'churning' as some people find that they are not temperamentally suited to living in community. While most of those attracted are passionate about it and collectively move mountains, there will always be a small percentage of these others. It is helpful to everyone to help them weed themselves out in advance. Some have entertained the concept of a 'Difficult Persons Policy'! At the very least, governance structures for decision making and conflict management and Vision and By-laws should precede most else, and particularly precede the transition from core group to expanded community. From this perspective,

EcoVillages and Co-ops are somewhat more individualistic than Cohousing, while retaining a much higher level of structured social opportunity than normal developments.

From a developer's point of view, major risks lie in delays and in not finding your community, so you will be wanting to find much faster ways to implement than the median of some 5-10 years. Many delays can be mitigated by a lot of hard work early, in getting the Community Title or Community Land Trust/Cooperative Trust/Limited Equity Trust/Cooperative Share Loan approval documentation right first time (or whatever land tenure type), and by developing cordial relationships in advance with the local government.

Section 4 has indicated some of the ways you might help those who have no time but would like the community. If you visit a number of existing communities as suggested, you will start to notice patterns in the types of elements they cherish. It is a fair bet that if you get the principles right and are discriminating about when and about what you invite resident input, that you will be able to shorten the process significantly. The reason for the protracted times taken by traditional communities is typically that they have no up-front capital, they can not compete with developers for the land they identify, and get into recurrent 'missing out' patterns – and get discouraged, and they try to do everything themselves when they have no idea how to 'do development'. They also get into the resistance issues you yourself may meet with local government, financiers and utilities. But with care, you will have more clout in all these than they. You have all these other capacities already. And you will probably be better at marketing and packaging.

It is also helpful to know that for all the feel-good, most people are actually very uninformed about both eco- and social nuts and bolts, and it is also common for people to come for one and not the other, with the past bias towards the social, and the latest being a hope to save money through resource efficiency. There is certainly a place for education and training opportunities for future residents, and given the physical infrastructure such as a common house preferably designed with their input, they can be encouraged to participate in this themselves. An owner's manual is an important document.

BUT, in Scandinavia it is very common, perhaps usual to supply a Common House for a block of apartments. By no means all use them in the Cohousing way - a social capital opportunity and potential fun, relaxation and mutual savings benefit missed. Experience shows that the level of social activity depends very closely on having at least one 'firesoul' in the community with leadership qualities. Some people would be better off in an ESD eco-housing estate such as Lochiel Park. However if you decided to implement a Cohousing or an EcoVillage, you may want to look out for these firesoul types and take a leaf out of the book of those who seek to establish new ideas in organisations: find one or more 'champions' and invite them into leadership positions within your new community, as the social quality can be made or broken by the presence or absence of good leadership.

With the social side of these models, transitioning to mainstream, it is of critical importance that residents have a good and early grounding in meeting and governance structures such as Robert's Rules, Sociocracy; (decision making by consent), Consensus minus one, Sociodrama, conflict resolution etc – by training if necessary (and it usually is). The building of social glue is absolutely necessary if people are to live co-operatively. If you create the community then invite them in, you need to pre-empt their needs from a position of understanding and ensure that the needed support is available. A meeting place or common house early on is also critical.

Common tasks that help build 'glue' include sharing work together, committee work, having a secondary body corporate for each cluster of housing (Community Title), involvement in design of common house, other buildings, neighbourhood and By-laws; theme meetings, relevant educational opportunities, gardening, weeding, planting; social opportunities, rituals, devising clear entry and exit procedures, ride sharing, special interest groups, community businesses; participation as a community in local regional events.

With mainstream projects such as 'Lochiel Park' in SA, the sustainability features are benchmarked to a higher than usual ESD standard but the titles are mainstream Torrens Title and Local Government has the usual roles. However an intranet has been set up, rideshare is on the Intranet, a coffee place is planned and an historic building belonging to Local Government is likely to be available as a community meeting place. The Land Management Corporation is making an

effort to think through and provide the infrastructure that can be a supportive backcloth to a closer-than-normal community with mutual engagement.

Points of difference between Co-op, Cohousing or EcoVillage and standard estate development include:

- working with the differences between individual and collective ownership and lifestyle
- deciding whether to prioritise finding land or community and timing of purchase (given the potential holding costs for a 1-5-year process)
- the challenge of finding your community for a niche market
- challenge of adapting the eco-social concepts behind IC to a mainstream context
- challenges in finding front-end finance and ways to constrain approval and construction times while guarding social equity
- getting the figures to add up when a developer needing to make a profit may be constructing something previously supplied gradually and piecemeal, with low cost or recycled materials by sweat equity, in private time
- challenges in offsetting the extra financial and environmental costs of thermal mass and solar technology (good design is NOT necessarily more costly); poor lot orientation can make eco-design impossible (see [Wrigley, 2007](#))
- balancing control, costs, risk and partnership with future residents
- coming to terms with the necessary community-building and decision making processes and finding faster ways of achieving a similar social result
- the impact of unusual processes and strategies on development approval, seeking the goodwill of utility providers and financiers/banks in advance by including them earlier and with tighter engagement; some banks are now starting to self-promote as supportive of green development or shared equity loans
- understanding and acting on the urgency of providing demonstration projects of high-performance alternatives to financial, eco and social unsustainability.

In addition there are differences between different types of Intentional Community based on rural vs urban/town or village zoning and whether on Community Title, Strata Title or Multiple Occupancy (rural land sharing community or urban land trusts):

- development approval process
- likely off-site impacts
- lifestyle (social and employment) opportunities
- practical constraints
- provision of and accessibility to services
- construction costs
- ongoing maintenance costs
- community makeup etc.

And then, the usual developer questions need to be asked, such as:

- What do you get for your money?
- How much more does it cost extra?
- Are the eco sustainable practices approved by the different government authorities?
- Do you have feasibility studies?
- Do you have due diligence statements?
- Do you have certified valuations?
- What supporting documentation do you have for the success of the project?
- Do you have presales?
- What is your marketing strategy for presales?
- Is this the right place to develop this concept?

- Is the raw land too expensive from the start for this type of development – is the land more suitable for something else?
- Can we make any money?

With ESD and 'Eco-housing', standards are rapidly rising. A new requirement to become mandatory in the UK (maybe also 'coming to a house near you' with the advent of carbon trading), is Zero Carbon housing. This is not yet based on Life Cycle Analysis, but on energy consumption over house's lifetime, so materials do not count as they should for real sustainability. The Hockerton Housing Project is 5 attached units of earth-sheltered eco-housing that was designed by Brenda and Robert Vale who have made it their life's work to design and build radically energy efficient housing. Project Summary:

<http://www.hockertonhousingproject.org.uk/SEFS/ID.774/SEFE/ViewItem.asp/>;

The houses: <http://www.hockertonhousingproject.org.uk/SEFS/ID.955/SEFE/ViewItem.asp/>;

Discussion on zero carbon homes and critique of the basis of the UK standard:

<http://www.hockertonhousingproject.org.uk/modules/News/ViewNewsItem.asp?ID=215/>.

While 'Urban Ecology' is an umbrella term that can mean a green project or a green building, it usually regards itself as an element or a 'piece of EcoCity', the hoped for green city of the future that is based on an 'EcoCycles' concept of urban metabolism. See [urbanecologyelements.doc/](#), [9PerfCharsVanN.doc/](#) and www.arch.umanitoba.ca/vanvliet/sustainable/contents.htm/. David van Vliet's (University of Manitoba Architecture Department) Urban Ecology elements and his website are an excellent resource for eco-social strategies.

There are many elements of the '5-minute' city', 'the walking city' or the 'pedestrian neighbourhood', 'Transit Oriented Development', relying on transit and traffic calming, living near work or working from home, and awareness and support of local wildlife. In the 'cycular' city, Nature is emulated, so like Nature, nothing is wasted, all is recycled or reused, exotics are avoided unless useful, waste is regarded as money thrown away, industrial ecology is very active (as with [MFP Australia](#), which identified 52 waste capture opportunities in the Port Adelaide industrial area and also did valuable work on finding uses for municipal landfill waste streams, including soil building), and the Bioregion or Catchment is seen as the context for planning and infrastructure with Landscape Ecology as the principal science.

Buildings and landscape should be designed as a unit. Landscape Ecology is not a disconnected garden or 'landscaping' add-on in this context. It is usual if selling a package of this type for a planting list to be available and some plants may be selected from the list as part of the package (and some aspects are mandatory: no weed species, local indigenous by preference, useful food, fibre or medicinal plants are welcome unless weedy, and deciduous trees are used mindfully if these is a reason for their presence). Plantings should take everyone's solar access into account. With plantings on common land, the community needs to be involved in such decisions. Suggestion number 1: get the landscape designers, preferable [Permaculture](#) designers or landscape architects, in first before the engineers. Avoid hard engineering, including non-absorptive surfaces, kerbs and gutters, concrete drains, wide roads – and on no account just clear the site. Do site analysis, biodiversity mapping and functional landscape design. Many costs can be thus avoided. Raze no land, use no poisons, including no termiticides and if at all possible, no glyphosate either: build termites out ([Verkerk, 1990](#)).

To tune into this level in a design setting, the combination of Landscape Architecture and Permaculture is very rare in a professional, but is highly recommended. Some urban designers have the necessary experience (www.planning.org.au/: Consultant Directory), or some landscape architects (www.aila.org.au/: Directory of Consultants). The only courses in Australia with anything like this focus are the [Permaculture Design courses](#) at Crystal Waters and Jarlanbah, and the [Diploma of Garden Design](#) course at TAFE SA, developed by Pam Gurner-Hall of Sustainable Design Studios, who does have that unique professional combination. It has 25 of 48 units accredited towards a landscape architecture degree, and three diploma units dedicated to EcoVillage Design.

While this may be seen as more relevant to Environmental Management Systems in business, half a day spent doing Ecomapping (www.ecointegrity.org/ or <http://www.proveandimprove.org/new/tools/ecomapping.php/>) will help untrained people go a long

way towards understanding what sustainability on their land and in their buildings is about and more.

Anyone flying over the older Australian suburbs will see a pattern of buildings facing the street, with substantial areas of contiguous, variously-utilised (often under-utilised) back yards behind them. There is a significant opportunity to do the Kolding type of green, community-based redevelopment in our older suburbs, which could provide all the advantages of Cohousing, including community lifestyle, natural surveillance and mutual social support, health and safety for children, energy, water and food security and substantial improvement in building performance - and maybe also provide that opportunity for seniors to 'age in place' in the company of friends. This type of redevelopment has been done in the USA, with one or two houses in the block being commandeered as a community centre.

This is an exciting time of transition and opportunity. The system is speeding up. There are many opportunities for new developer-led approaches to Co-operative Lifestyle, which may not be quite the same as traditional alternatives, but should have the same objectives. The multi-award winning EcoVillage at Currumbin (Qld): <http://www.theecovillage.com.au/>, www.greenedge.com.au/ lies at one end of the developer-led spectrum, Somerville somewhere central: www.somervilleecovillage.com.au/ and Greenhouse's Bunjil and Dulai Wurrong (Melbourne): www.dulai.net/, could be said to lie at the other.

The spirit of Intentional Community is open source: a sharing of knowledge and information. The intention is continual improvement, working together for a sustainable and co-operative world. Please honour that in your dealings with the communities who will share with you. Realise that they have many visitors and requests for information. It drives them crazy at times. Respect this, as your turn will come. When that happens, remember the injunction: "Pass it on!"

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Key to colour codes: Red = Glossary, Blue = Bibliography, Green = Case Studies related to Cohousing and EcoVillages and Other Models Fact Sheets, orange = internal links.

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