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Urban Permaculture in Havana: Implications for Sustainable Cities of the South and North

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[Presentation Report]

Adam

The project started with groups in Melbourne and Sydney wanting to support the socialist state of Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the US blockade on trade.

In 1993 a group of permaculturists went and ran a permaculture design course, but there was some resistance from young people who felt that the country had already passed through the 'campesino stage'. A mandala garden was constructed but never planted (due to a change of government department).

In 1994 the Green Team, in association with the Permaculture Global Assistance Network, applied for funding and received a \$25,000 grant from the Australian government. Sarah and Tony went to Havana and worked for a year, and taught the first Permaculture Design Certificate course.

The main emphasis of the project was forming a link between two communities, the one in Melbourne, Australia, and the other in Havana, Cuba.

Sarah

The urban project started because there was a food shortage at the time of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. People in the city either could not get food because of a shortage in production, due to a shortage in availability of chemicals etc, or because of transport difficulties due to a shortage of petrol.

The government supported the urban food project in Havana. In 1989, because of the shortages, known as the 'special period', a new law was passed; allowing anyone to cultivate vacant land.

There were 30 extensionistas working in 15 different city sectors, to help city gardeners.

After the revolution the models for development were large-scale Soviet style. People in general have a high level of education but many are not interested in, or have skills in, gardening.

The aim of the project was to train trainers who would then take information back to their communities. Participants were chosen by their community extension workers on the basis of their capacity to serve their community. The workshops took place over five days, with an emphasis on practical things. Agro-Alemaigne donated tools, which were distributed through city garden clubs. The Collective ethos is very strong in Cuba and people take equal distribution very seriously, but sometimes this is counter-productive (for example, they cut hoses into two metre lengths).

A strong emphasis was on the dissemination of information. In Cuba at the time of the project there were only two publications available – the daily newspaper and the newsletter produced by the project, *Se Puede*. People loved it, they had been starved of information, since there had been no paper available to make community publications. *Se Puede* was passed round and the shared knowledge was highly valued.

Jude

Seed Saver's Network went to Havana in January 1996 to work with the extensionistas and the Urban Agriculture Department. They worked in 15 different municipalities with the extensionistas, usually young women, working (ironically, Jude said) with the city gardeners who were usually older men. This related to one of the three issues flagged for discussion in the session – working under constraints, replication of similar projects elsewhere in the world, and supporting this particular project.