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From Aquarius Dreaming to Nineties Reality: Nimbin's Coming of Age

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[Submitted Paper]

The village of Nimbin has been a focal point for alternative lifestyles, communities and technology since the Aquarius Festival in 1973. Two decades of new settlers and alternative lifestylers has repopulated the area to the extent that now the small village services a dispersed rural catchment of nearly 10,000 people. The 'isolationist' policy that marked much of the alternative movement in the past has created its own problems which are now being addressed through an integrative approach to the planning and design of Nimbin in recent years.

This paper looks first at the 'big picture' of Nimbin's historic and bioregional context, with a summary of the natural, servicing and social catchments of the location and its wider community. This is followed by the community-driven planning process which ushered in a new growth and development era for the village, and which, through permaculture design, has begun to realise the ideals and aspirations of the early 'alternative' movement in a cohesive and integrative way.

Historic context

The Nimbin valley holds a special place for the Bundjalung peoples with significant sacred sites, ceremonial grounds, initiation places and for the training of healers. Over a century ago things changed with European settlement. The magnificent subtropic rainforests of "The Big Scrub" were cleared for timber, dairy farming and banana plantations. Nimbin was a thriving rural village until the 1960's when England joined the Common Market and ceased importing Australian butter which devastated the dairy industry, triggering the decline of many rural communities throughout the east coast.

By the early 1970's Nimbin was a shadow of its former self until it was selected as the site for the Aquarius Festival. The influx of hippies and alternative lifestylers during and following the 1973 festival resulted in a new population growth for the village and district, and a proliferation of intentional communities in the area. The general rural settlement movement of the 1980's and 1990's has continued the repopulation

of the area. Most of this settlement pattern has resulted in a widely dispersed rural population.

Catchment context

Natural catchment

Nimbin lies south of the Mount Warning caldera. The valley is surrounded by ancient volcanic ranges covered in World Heritage rainforests in the upper catchment of the Wilson's River, the major tributary of the Richmond River. These remnant forests are home to a significant and rare gene pool of subtropical rainforest species including a rich diversity of native food, spice and medicinal plants. The fertile soils, high rainfall and subtropical climate support a wide range of crops including subtropical fruits, nuts, coffee, tea, herbs, vegetables, bushfoods, and farm forestry. Value adding cottage industry and small business are becoming a more significant part of the local economy.

Service catchment

Electricity is imported from the Hunter Valley, over 700 km away. Northern NSW Wales is at the end of the line, and the fastest growing rural region in the state, thus thresholds are approaching capacity. The issue of energy has required careful consideration, from the 'stand-alone' systems for remote rural communities and households pioneered by Rainbow Power Company, to exploring demand reduction strategies and feeding clean renewable electricity into the main grid for new village and clustered development.

Until the recent reticulated village sewage scheme, septic effluent from the village and rural communities generated serious pollution in the creeks. The heavy clay soils (0-10% permeability) are not suitable for traditional septic absorption treatment. Environmentally desirable rural treatment options have played a major part in the new village fringe developments.

In terms of community services, supply falls short of need in the village, with most major services provided in the provincial city of Lismore, 30 km from Nimbin. Private bus companies provide a limited public transport service to Lismore where major bus, rail and air connections are available. Motor vehicle dependency is a major dilemma for over 80% of the Nimbin district population and a key issue in village planning re- traffic and parking.

Social catchment

Nimbin services a dispersed rural population of around 10,000 within a 10-15 km radius of the village (see Figures 1, 2 and 3 below). The small busy village centre provides for basic shopping needs, some professional services, health services, a small hospital, movie house, entertainment and lots of cafes. Schooling from pre-school to Year 12 is provided by State and several small alternative private schools. District sports and recreational facilities are well used and supported. What can't be found in Nimbin will be available 30km away in Lismore, a well serviced regional centre with University, TAFE and specialist training institutions, professional, retail and industry, employment and social opportunities, as well as a wide range of State and Federal Government agencies and offices.

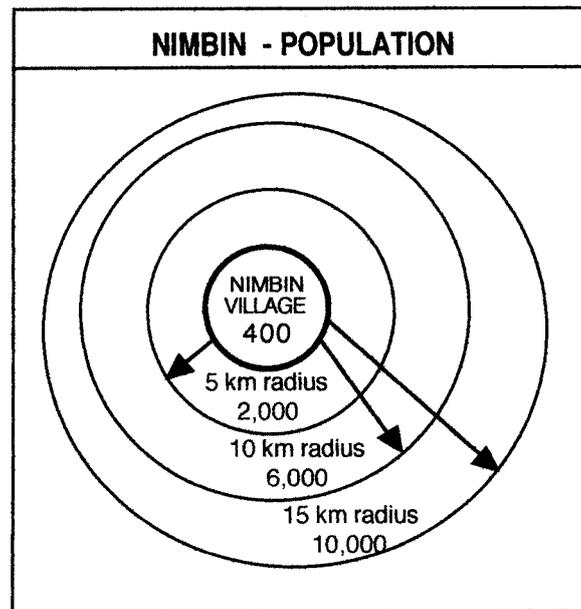


Figure 1: Nimbin population distribution

Community planning

In 1990 following a series of village meetings the community of Nimbin approached Council to have a planning study of the village, to define new boundaries for village expansion and to establish a Development Control Plan to determine the nature of any new development. The community chose their own planner, Rob Doolan, Council agreed and the process proceeded.

The key problem identified by the community was that the village itself had not grown proportionately to service the needs of its rural population in providing commercial premises, housing and open space recreation. The community was, and still is, concerned that any development or expansion of the village is in keeping with the character of Nimbin, the spirit of diversity, acceptance and “green” aspirations of it’s community and creative cultural expression through the arts.

Permaculture input

It was during the above planning study that I was invited to develop a permaculture concept plan to integrate the new village areas and nearby rural residential land with each other and the existing village. Following thirteen years of involvement with remote rural communities, this was the opportunity I’d been waiting for, the revitalisation of an existing village. The trend for intentional communities to settle on large remote rural properties attempting to create ‘self-reliance’ in isolation has resulted in a litany of social, economic as well as environmental problems and a widely dispersed rural population difficult to service. Yet there are so many small rural settlements in need of revitalisation, where infrastructures (school, community hall, general store etc) exist to build on, where a clustered population boost would bring needed services and business opportunities into the thresholds of viability.



Figure 2: Nimbin village social catchment profile

Key components of new village developments

The first developments have been on rural land adjoining the village boundary. The proximity to the village provides accommodates the amenity of rural living within walking distance of village facilities.

Jarlanbah Permaculture Hamlet

This 55 acre rural residential property is a short 1.5 km from the heart of Nimbin village – a short bike ride and pleasant walking distance. As NSW's first rural community title, it consists of 43 freehold residential lots which share 33 acres of community land.

The residential lots are 2,000 sqm (half acre) a manageable size and adequate for a generous zone 1 garden, food forest and small livestock systems. By-laws ensure the use of passive solar design, water collection and conservation, and foster responsibility towards neighbours. Solar rights are protected and use of compost toilets and grey water treatment for re-use encouraged. The internal grid electricity system, privately owned by the community, delivers a 20 amp connection ensuring the use of energy efficient appliances. A 5 amp trickle feed is available for stand-alone solar systems eliminating the need for generators.

Example of Cultural Mapping

as a tool in design these maps show people's use patterns and the issues that concern them

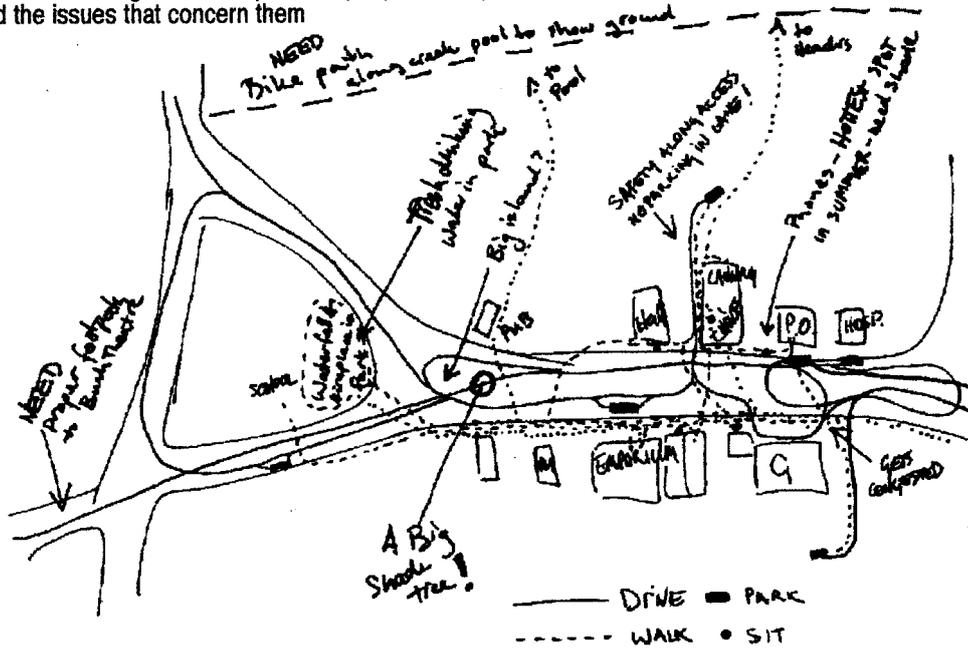
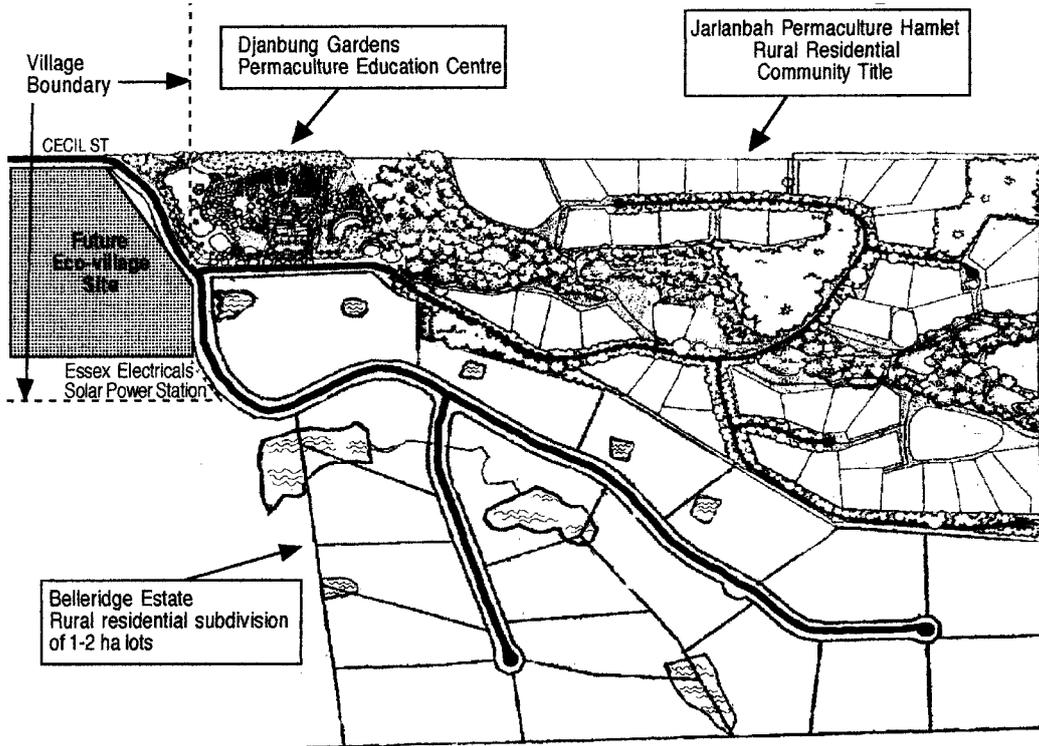


Figure 3: Nimbin cultural mapping



Nimbin Village - New Permaculture Settlements

Figure 4: Nimbin Village - new permaculture settlements

The community land is designated for specific uses and activities. The major gully system is reserved for rainforest regeneration and has 5 dams for wildlife, recre-

ation, aquaculture and fire fighting. There are 3 woodlots, 5 areas for sustainable agriculture, a central community centre and open space area. A network of slashed tracks provide walking trails, access for maintenance and fire breaks. The wildlife corridor and a walking track connect via Djanbung Gardens to the village.

Belleridge

Adjoining Jarlanbah, and the same proximity to the village is 'Belleridge', a rural residential subdivision of 1-2 hectare freehold lots. This provides an alternative option to Jarlanbah for those who need more personal land and don't yet feel ready for 'community' life. The lots are designed so that 2-3 lots share a common dam which will necessitate communication and cooperation between neighbours. Like Jarlanbah, the purchase price includes a Permaculture design course to give residents the best possible start with sustainable design and development of their land.

The present of Jarlanbah has spilled over into local government planning policies, so many of the design principles and By-laws of Jarlanbah are now enshrined in policies and development conditions imposed by Council on new rural residential subdivisions which apply to Belleridge.

Djanbung Gardens

Djanbung Gardens Permaculture Education Centre is a 2 ha rural property at the edge of the village and neighbouring Jarlanbah and Belleridge. The demonstration farm and educational facilities provide a resource for the broader community. A permaculture education and demonstration site in or near the village was identified as a high priority at the Nimbin Eco-tourism Conference in 1992, attended by over 400 local people. By late 1997 the facilities will be completed and the centre will be fully operational. The demonstration farm is already established as a key destination for environmental tourism in Nimbin.

Eco-village

Across the road from Djanbung Gardens is an 8 acre property zoned for village residential. Purchased by a collective of people, including a Jarlanbah resident, the area will be developed as a permaculture eco-village with housing options including individual homes, townhouse cluster and expanded households. These will provide a range of living options not currently available in the village, especially for young people, the aged and rental accommodation. Eventually there will be Jarlanbah and Belleridge residents and aging 'hippies' in the hills who will be looking to retire in the village.

Other re-zoned village land provides for a Village Park with open space, active and passive recreation, small industry and commercial sites. Rainbow Power Company, a rainforest nursery and a small complex of workshop buildings are already operational in this area. These link via the gully systems with the eco-village site, Djanbung Gardens and Jarlanbah. Community plantings along the gullies are designed as interconnecting wildlife corridors.

Working with council

Since designing Jarlanbah and moving to Nimbin, our local government Lismore City Council, has become increasingly receptive to permaculture design. Through Permaculture Systems Consulting and Design, I have been engaged by Council for a number of design and implementation projects in Nimbin including a major community consultation process for the landscape of the village centre. With a team of local permaculturists, workshops were conducted with the school (Kindergarten to Year 12), community groups, organisations and general public.

The theme was “Nimbin-Sense of Place; Designing Our Future”. Cultural mapping revealed important insights into people’s use of the village, problem areas and unmet needs. Questionnaires identified community values, priorities and aspirations as well as themes and ideas for the village landscape plan. A scale model of the village centre provided the perfect medium for interactive design workshops for the landscape, seating and traffic calming of the main street. All ideas were run through the “reality test” and the resulting design creatively addresses people’s real needs while satisfying Council’s requirements

The community consultation report documents the process and outcomes and has provided Council with a valuable guide for priorities in their decision making and works programmes. These include parking, landscaping, bicycleway and footpath routes, open space and signage.

Working with the community

Nimbin is unique, it’s community encompasses a wide range of human and cultural diversity from the conservative rural bastions of the Bowling Club and Agricultural Show Society, the middle ground of ‘normal’ folk, of professionals and business people, full spectrum of alternative lifestylers, aging hippies, young ferals, and the transient outcasts of other communities that live on the street. The amazing thing about Nimbin is the acceptance and tolerance of this human diversity. Both the diversity and the tolerance are intrinsic characteristics treasured by the community, young and old, straight and bent!

The community of Nimbin is very vocal, distrustful of governments, developers and anyone who may have ‘hidden agendas’. I have had to earn the trust and respect of the community and have now achieved this through listening and responding to their concerns, and delivering designs that acknowledge their input, genuinely reflect their aspirations and enrich Nimbin’s unique ‘sense of place’. It has meant treading a fine line between the factions, identifying the common ground and building upon that base of community consensus.

Community acceptance has flowed on with requests from community groups and organisations for assistance and advice with planning and design which I give freely as my contribution to the well-being and future of my community and neighbourhood.

Summary

Cooperation between community and local government, community consultation, designing between boundaries, retrofitting and building on what exists and augmenting it with new sustainable developments – Nimbin provides a unique example

of an innovative approach to integrated eco-village design and community planning on a village and district level within the context of the wider bioregion. This is where the future of sustainable design for human settlement lies.

Bibliography and further reading

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Robyn Francis is highly regarded for her extensive work in Permaculture since 1984 as teacher, designer, presenter, writer, editor of the PIJ ('87-'92), founding of Permaculture International Ltd., presenter of the Mandala Garden video and the designer of Jarlanbah Permaculture Hamlet. In 1985 Robyn received the Permaculture Community Service Award and in 1995 received the ABC Rural Woman of the Year Award for NSW North Coast for her contribution to sustainable landuse planning & education. Robyn has been instrumental in the legislation of the new Rural Settlement Policy for the North Coast of NSW. Since 1994 Robyn has been based in Nimbin creating her Permaculture paradise at Djanbung Gardens and consulting for local Council, community groups & eco-developments in the village.