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Mirrunga Village

Alex Mond (Australia)

[Presentation Report]

Alex Mond came to Australia from Czechoslovakia in 1967. He has spent 20 years as an exploration Geologist, ten years in the public service as a Geologist and then as a business manager. During the last four years he has been involved in the development of eco-villages. He's had a very exciting life – the only common thread through these aspects of his life has been living on the edge. According to Alex, life on the edge is difficult but very rewarding. Australia is a very exciting place in which to live.

He has developed a special relationship to the land. His approach to development is rather different to that of most people. His project over the last twenty years has involved nine hundred hectares which are located fifty kilometres south of the ACT. It consists of three parts, the first part is a village development of about one hundred and seventy hectares. Next he would like to build up some small research or conference facilities. The community will not be based on a few individuals but rather based on university staff and students and young people. It will require a large area for the education of tourists. The site is located with the Murrumbidgee river on one side and Namaji national park on the other. It is part of the Murray-Darling Basin and is located in the upper Murrumbidgee area.

There is a very active catchment group and it has been very exciting in the last six months to see people associating within bioregions. People involved comprise not only people from the land but also people from Canberra. After many years of talking about it, all of a sudden it came together.

When he first put the project together a few years ago he didn't quite know what he was doing and everyone was quite sceptical. Robyn Francis came along with a checklist suggesting that everything fitted perfectly in his development and that indicated that he was on the right track.

Australia doesn't really have pilot projects at the current time, the only pilot project we can refer to is Crystal Waters. Many existing projects don't involve the mainstream of population. In Canberra at the present time there are more developments than in any other part of Australia. At the present time we really need some good

examples. The local councils have been passing regulations without knowing what they were passing regulations about. That's why it is so important to build pilot projects all over the place, City Farms, big settlements, etc.

Catchment planning involves looking at the big picture. It is very hard for the government to make the relevant decisions because it cuts across the local government boundaries. Alex started with catchment plans and it was very exciting even at the start. Suddenly everything fell in to place. He found the perfect site and it was only owned by two people. It is not much good to identify the perfect site if it is owned by local people. Settlement patterns had to fit in to a general strategy of the local government.

Traditionally planning hasn't talked about people's needs. A planning revolution was started by McHarg in America. This was adapted by Frederick Steiner and following this process it is quite easy to establish what should be done in a particular area.

When Alex started this project he couldn't get any permaculture designers involved, they were all too busy. He looked to national and interstate engineering firms. They all told him that there would be no way that he could get the project approved, that it would be too difficult, that there were insufficient resources. He was just about to give up when he managed to get a major utility in Canberra on side.

Very little of the area has been cleared in the past. They have identified eighteen species of birds, two hundred species of plants, ninety per cent of them native, four species of kangaroos, echidnas, platypus. This is all located within fifty kilometres of Canberra.

It is necessary to have a holistic approach, a vision of the whole. The vision or goal has to be supported by several objectives. It is really necessary to look at what is already there. By design he tried to encourage diversity of lifestyle, by creating a diversity of different sized lots.

In the last twelve months, the project has started to accumulate money and things have changed. One can't over-regulate developments. In New South Wales they have very good legislation which allows quite a lot of flexibility. Some people try to implement very strict regulations and they are called eco-fascists. People move in on the understanding that they can do this and they can't do that but after time they decide they wanted ten thousand times as much lawn as was allowed so they complain that this is too regulated. It is best to go by example and by advice. Experience shows that when people have a good example and a very good set of guidelines then they will follow it. There are always some individuals who try to do their own thing. But in communities this doesn't last long.

Very often the geology of an area is ignored in developments and very few people get recent geologies done. Usually it is lip service, they just do the minimum that is required by the Environmental Protection Agency and they don't really put serious interest in it. When Alex presented his concept to the shire he was followed by another developer who was designing some standard development. The developer commented on Alex's presentation, saying that Australians don't like this sharing and community life because that is only good for Americans. We are individuals here, rugged Australians.

Efficient servicing and self-reliance is what really gives an individual power. By controlling your power, by controlling your sewerage and garbage, that gives you freedom. You don't have to go to the council and beg. Controlling your facility, controlling your life gives you power. In this development the only things that will be controlled by the outside will be the roads and telephone. The don't have access to solar power but by being efficient and using new appliances that are coming on to the market, people are becoming more aware about how to use power. The only thing that makes it difficult is that all power is subsidised.

A lot of things can be done by designing, by identifying individual units so that people have a sense of place, a sense of belonging. You are probably aware of Crystal Waters which people complain is too spread out, there is no centre hub. As long as we learn from our mistakes.

The whole area of the eco village is four hundred acres.

Being in a steep area provides privacy and at the same time there is proximity, there is closeness. By creating diversity in the lots, they are hoping to create diversity in the community. If people have a good example and a very good set of guidelines they will follow it. It took him about ten years to actually work out what to do with the place. This place is the nicest place along the Murrumbidgee. There will be a hub: a community centre, an enterprise centre, an eating place, a meeting place. This development is about quality of life. Education takes time but it is the main tool that can be used. There are a lot of designers coming out of these colleges and there is tremendous interest. Everywhere he goes he gets tremendous support.

In Australia the tenure system varies from state to state. In New South Wales there is the Policy and Title Act, which is only about eight years old. In Queensland there is similar legislation. Alex is not trying to say that this is the best system, just that it applies to him. In some areas, common occupancy might be more suitable.

The theme is the most important part. It took him a long time but once he had decided on the theme everything fell in to place. It is important for the developer, it is important for the designer. It is important for the people, it is important for the council. When it has a name to it people can associate with it. Crystal Waters was called a permaculture village and people had certain expectations of it. People go to Crystal Waters and expect to see permaculture paradise on the earth. When he couldn't get any permaculture designers for his eco village, Alex dropped the word permaculture from its title. Participatory settlement planning is very important. After a while you establish your credibility, people know that they can trust you and the co-operation is tremendous. He met the best planners in the area who looked at his proposal and said that it wouldn't pass the council. So he put the proposal himself and got one hundred per cent approval by the council.

It is important to work with the community in the Bioregion. Government authorities are suspicious, there is always the NIMBY complex, Not In My Backyard. NIMBY is outdated, we need a holistic approach. The most important part is community resource management. There is legislation that says you can't develop within one hundred and fifty metres from the river. So he wanted to make a plan that would look so good, the authorities would look like fools if they said it couldn't be done. He

got AUSLINK to map the area properly, the authorities had never done it themselves. With digital mapping there are no arguments. It is necessary to use the necessary technical tools.

The best thing that ever happened to him was having a group of students coming from Canberra University, Landscape Architects. In two hours they picked up the sense of place which had taken him two years to do. It was very exciting. He doesn't agree with all of the doom that he's been hearing about. If the people spreading the gloom were right then he would be dead by now. At the universities they went through Malthusian theory, not Malthusian theory, now they call it something else. Young people that he knows are not scared of the future. They are ready for it, they are happy. Groucho Marx said : "why to worry about the next generation? What have they done for us?"

Alex quoted Peter Cuming , saying: "I wouldn't be doing this if not for the youth of the next generation."