



*Proceedings of the Sixth International Permaculture Conference
September-October 1996, Perth, Western Australia*

© Copyright Permaculture Association of Western Australia Inc. and authors.

Urban Eco-villages Group in Melbourne

Neil Simpson, Phil Gall, Sandy King, Vasko Drogriski (Australia)

[Submitted Paper]

It tends to be assumed that urban living entails having to live with urban blight: traffic choked roadways; polluted air and watercourses; suburban sprawl and alienated social environments. Less obvious is the extraordinary inefficiency of cities in dealing with energy needs, the supply of resources such as food and materials, the disposal of waste and the fact that private transport contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions. The Local Agenda 21 Document agreed to at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit stipulates that 'development' and the protection of the environment cannot be separated. Many financiers are no longer investing in the more dysfunctional cities, and there is now a world-wide movement seriously looking at radical solutions to the urban crisis.

An ecologically sustainable city, or eco-city, while replacing the natural environment with a built one, would in its ideal form replace what it uses, and be primarily based on renewable resources. It would also be socially as well as environmentally sustainable. Around the world there are numerous eco-village projects which are providing examples of appropriate technologies and design. However, these are sometimes dismissed as utopian and as acceptable only to small or closed communities. Indeed, attachment to commonly held expectations, such as having a car and one's own backyard, are elements limiting urban planning strategies. Suspicion of development involving increased housing density has also arisen as a result of years of flats, dual occupancy and smaller allotment policies which have been exploited for profit and have not contributed to more fully integrated planning.

In this context the Urban Villages Project of the Victorian Department of Planning and Development can be seen as offering a transitional model to a fuller eco-city plan. Designs have been submitted for retrofitting as urban villages eight sites, which are as diverse as Preston, Bayswater, North Geelong and Sandringham. The aim is to provide shops, neighbourhood services, workplaces and public transport within a walkable 400m of residential areas. The designs promote sustainability in that they aim to decrease the need for car use and provide high-density energy efficient house design. The Report recognises 1000 potential urban village sites centred on public transport nodes around Melbourne, and argues that as well as reducing

greenhouse gas emissions this development strategy could absorb Melbourne's projected population increase within the existing metropolitan region until well into the next century.

The Urban Eco-village Group was formed to defend the general aims of the Urban Villages Report and to extend its sustainability criteria in the social as well as the environmental domain. We want to:

- Make contact with the residents and councils involved with the eight designs and contribute to their ongoing development and implementation.
- Help initiate designs at other sites by having meetings in neighbourhoods where we have contacts, or where there are especially suitable sites.
- Encourage more radically sustainable designs, incorporating such things as solar power generation, compost toilets, urban food production, a variety of public housing and expansion of public open space.
- Investigate how planning decisions are made and financed, with a view to maximising and extending the democratic openings.
- Build alliances.

A significant aspect of urban village planning is community involvement. In a political climate of government cutbacks and planning by decree, this provides an opportunity for people to become pro-active in decision-making which directly affects their quality of life.

Indicators of urban villages

What does it take for parts of a city to be transformed into an urban eco-village? How can the degree to which a particular area approximates, or fails to approximate, to this status be measured? Indicators of urban eco-village status include the following. As well as being used as a quantitative index, the indicators can also be directly linked to specific design considerations (as shown in italics).

Environment and land use

- Percentage of open space used for organic food production.

Possible sites for a community garden or urban food forest. The source of mulch for these and private gardens. Keyline principles to provide water and minimise maintenance costs.

- Percentage of public and private land under indigenous vegetation cover.

Sites of existing bushland and those suitable for indigenous revegetation, and the possible linking up of these areas.

- Degree of biodiversity and amount of habitat for native species.

The size of bushland needed to attract a variety of birds and small animals such as lizards. Incorporation of wetland areas.

- Levels of human/animal interaction in the community.

Site for an urban farm which includes farm animals. Waterway or dam site for the catching of fish and yabbies. Incorporation of chicken runs in garden designs. Decreased dependence on guard dogs for security and cats for companionship.

- Quantity of water both in human water supply and in waterways (eg. presence of native fish, frogs).

Find out where the street drains go and the possibility of introducing rubbish traps and wetland filters before runoff reaches waterways or beaches. Find out about the water supply and whether increased local collection would improve its quality.

- Quality of air.

Find out the main sources of air pollution in your area and how these are monitored and how they could be reduced.

Energy and resource use

- Ratio of renewable to non-renewable energy and resources in public and private use.

Look into generating electricity from the sun and wind locally.

- Degree of waste reduction and waste recycling.

Maximise the recycling of materials at your local tip, especially furniture, building and organic materials. Facilitate information sharing on the availability of excess materials. Coordinate waste collection from greengrocers and other food outlets for soil composting.

- Percentage of food grown locally.

Look into establishing a consumer- producer cooperative with any local food producers. Extend such “market garden” areas. Support individual home production, including the sharing of excess produce.

- Degree of self-sufficiency in water supply.

Collect and use rainwater from public and private buildings for drinking, aquaculture in ponds, maintaining wetlands, water recreation and garden watering. Re-use greywater.

- Average distance travelled to work.

Encourage car-pooling and look into improving the attractiveness of public transport for commuters (eg, coffee at your local train station). Develop local employment opportunities.

Transport and traffic calming

- Kilometers of designated bicycle paths.

Encourage local bicyclists to organise and propose bicycle routes, including the modification of existing roads.

- Ratio of bicycle and public transport to private vehicular transport.

Find out how public transport use could be increased in your area. Increase the density of housing and services around public transport nodes, while trading this off with the provision of increased recreation facilities in these areas.

- Average distance of place of residence from shops and public transport.

Look into how local car trips could be minimised. Should home deliveries be subsidised? Food co-ops could be facilitated.

- Percentage of essential services and facilities accessible to the aged and those with disabilities.

Assure wheelchair accessibility to all public facilities. Minimise slopes around these.

- Percentage of town centres and lengths of street pedestrianized.

Improve streetscapes to buffer pedestrians from traffic and to ensure perceived safety of pathways.

- Average traffic speed in residential areas.

Slow traffic in residential and pedestrian areas, creating traffic by-pass routes if possible.

Community and social justice

- Numbers of neighbours known by name and houses in neighbourhood visited.

Encourage street parties, joint garage sales and the sharing of shopping. Provide and maintain local noticeboards. Plan for more neighbourhood centres. Encourage the sharing of backyards.

- Degree of perceived safety of the area.

Locate and improve perceived unsafe areas, after consulting especially with the young and old, women, people of different ethnicity and those with differing sexual preference.

- Incidence of local crime.

Interview the police and local welfare workers to ascertain the nature and extent of local crime. Provide facilities such as for youth recreation, job creation and men's groups that might lessen the incidence of these offences.

- Number and scale of neighbourhood co-operative ventures organising social and cultural events and exchange of local services.

Cater for existing popular recreations such as indoor soccer, backyard rock bands, graffiti art and skate boarding as well as the more traditional ones. Community activities can include LETS schemes, food co-ops, child care, political discussion and community gardening.

- Percentage of community-based local and minority group representation on decision-making bodies.

Provision should be made for expression of the culture and opinions of people from traditions other than the mainstream Australian one. This can mean bocce courts, multicultural festivals and multilingual presentations.

- Rates of homelessness and levels of support for people at risk.

A range of housing needs to be developed to cater for those on low income, those who choose to live in shared housing, the aged and for those seeking temporary refuge.

Economy and industry

- Percentage of residents' income earned, invested and spent locally.

Incorporate non-polluting and socially useful industries near to and interspersed with the residential areas. Aim to provide a diverse range of retail outlets and services locally.

- Percentage of population below the poverty line.

Low income residents have special needs in housing, adult education, health centres, job creation and social centres.

- Proportion of affordable housing.

As well as a variety of affordable housing designs, there can be a variety of ownership and renting options, such as housing co-ops and co-housing.

- Levels of industrial pollution.

Become familiar with the pollution monitoring agencies and their powers and ensure community involvement in the process. Connect with existing watchdog groups and create networks to detect local pollution sources.

- Number of independently conducted environmental audits of businesses.

Initiate environmental audits of businesses where necessary. Create community awareness of these factors in the environment.

The above paper was presented at an impromptu workshop at the Sixth International Permaculture Conference. The workshop took the form of an open forum involving about 100 participants. It needed to be pointed out that although the Report originated from a Victorian Government department its proposals are not necessarily government policy. The Urban Eco-villages Group can be seen as promoting community input into the process.