

## Record

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# Dreaming Cities To Life...

David Engwicht

Five years ago I knew next to nothing about transport, city-form or social sustainability. That changed during a five year fight to stop a major road development (Route 20) through our suburb in Brisbane. Last year that journey of discovery culminated in the publication of my book *Towards an Eco-City*.

During the Route 20 battle, we decided to look for city-wide solutions to traffic problems. Soon I found myself asking a naive question - why do we build cities?

Like most Australians I had a romantic attachment to the bush and a half hidden loathing of the city. But during a 1989 fact finding tour of Europe and the United States I began to gather new ideas of the value of cities as hot-beds of human creativity.

## The Passing Parade

In Paris I was captivated by the arrangement of seats at an outdoor cafe; they were all facing out, like seats in a theatre - unlike Australia where the seats are clustered around the table.

What were the patrons of this cafe doing as they looked at the faces of those walking past? I guessed they were mostly watching the drama of life played out in the faces of the passing parade; imagining their life stories. It mattered little as to the accuracy of these stories. It was a process that put them in contact with their own history; connecting them to their own past. It was a way of clarifying their own dreams for the future; a therapeutic exercise which promoted emotional, psychological and spiritual wellbeing.

By glimpsing this unseen exchange that was taking place between those on the seat and those on the street, I gained by first clue to the nature of Eco-City. One of the major roles of cities is to facilitate exchange. Exchange of information, friendship, material goods, culture, knowledge, insight, skills. Also the exchange of emotional, psychological and spiritual support. This exchange is more difficult or impossible if people are scattered all over the countryside. The city is a people-made ecosystem created for mutual enrichment.

My next lesson came from looking at the chairs in the Munich square. What struck me was that they were not nailed down and people could move them where they chose. One thing was obvious; the space looked chaotic. Where was the guiding hand of a planner to bring order? There was no design, no straight lines, no symmetrical shapes; just chaos. It reminded me of nature - chaotic yet brimming with life and creative energy.

Chaos and diversity are essential to life and therefore are inseparable from sustainability. Could it be that those in the Western world are yet to learn, like nature, that their survival depends on social and cultural diversity and their tolerance of some chaos?

## Fences to the Spirit

Segregated, regimented, mono-cultural cities are socially, and in the long-term economically, unsustainable. The tragedy of many modern Western cities is that they have become mono-cultural.

By mono-cultural I do not mean that they do not contain many cultures, but that these cultures have been segregated and fenced off from each other, much as some farmers segregate crops

into a field of corn, a field of beans and a field of tomatoes. Suburbs are created for certain socio-economic groupings. A 'privacy box' (the car) spirits people from the privacy of their home to work or entertainment and their children to sporting activities.

This fencing goes further. Our senior citizens are locked in retirement homes where they socialise only with people of their own age.

Such a mono-cultural existence which segregates the elderly, young, disabled, eccentric, poor or people from a different ethnic background, impoverishes all those in the city. Eccentrics are the disturbers of our peace and their role is indispensable also. Including all these people may not always be comfortable because they challenge prejudices and assumptions. They throw a comfortable world into chaos. But it is chaos which provides the opportunity for worlds to clash, new relationships to form and higher life forms to evolve.

## Indispensable Elements

One of the lessons I learnt from chairs is the importance of what may be considered the most insignificant elements in an ecosystem. A chair looks indispensable. Yet chairs are silent sentinels to the creative thoughts that were forged as people reclined upon them; scientific breakthroughs, songs written, solutions found, friendships developed, resolutions made and self-respect reclaimed. All these experiences have enriched the city, and therefore the chair has played a significant part in making great cities what they are.

In contrast, the dominance of car-based transport systems in cities has contributed greatly to segregation and the loss of social diversity as well as environmental damage. John Roberts observed: 'The vehicle also turns its occupants into disadvantaged persons, for it distracts them from the very activities that made cities happen; the face to face exchange of goods, services, information and ideas...'

This lesson was bought home to me with incredible force on my overseas trip. One of the cities I visited was Groningen in the north of Holland. I was only there for three hours yet saw three people in wheel chairs using the streets or bike lanes. The scene of two young people taking an elderly blind man for a walk was particularly moving.

The significance of my Groningen experience did not hit me until I was flying home. I was reflecting on my visit to Los Angeles where I had walked the streets for six hours trying to interview people, without success. It suddenly occurred to me that I could not recall seeing anyone in wheelchairs using the streets of Los Angeles.

## Rebuilding the City Together

In *Towards an Eco-City* I have written about the many ways I see people can join together to revitalise their cities. Here are some key ideas:

Build healthy neighbourhoods. Before any new residential development takes place, the boundaries of the neighbourhood/s and centre/s must be clearly defined. Then each neighbourhood should become as self-sufficient as possible. An identity should be nurtured through things like 'recollection boards' where people pin up stories or photographs. Also encourage the community life of the street through festivals, markets, gathering places, buskers, soap boxes.

Strengthen the city centre. It is here that the cultural experiences that take place in microcosm at the neighbourhood level happen on a grander scale. The focus of the city centre must be people, diverse cultural expression, commerce and colourful exchange.

Optimise exchange efficiency. The goal of the eco-city is to minimise the costs (resources and time) of exchange. This can be done by bringing destinations to the people rather than spending money on road space, time and resources to transport people to exchange opportunities. Increase the density of housing and creatively mix it with job and exchange opportunities.

Charge the true cost of transport. People who walk, cycle and use public transport subsidise the costs of people who drive. We must promote 'exchange-friendly' modes of transport. For example, increase the safety and attractiveness of walking and cycleways.

Build the 'commons'. Cheap energy and the automobile have dispersed urban life and reduced the shared domains such as courtyards and neighbourhood stores.

The neighbourhood promenade loop is a way of re-building the commons. This loop connects important activity centres: school, park, shopping centre, historical spots, transit stops, day-care centre, library. It has activity centres along its length such as children's fishing ponds and it never crosses a road. Boulder City in Colorado USA has a loop which is the social focus of the city.

Lastly, in planning cities, I think it is essential we consider most, those who are usually considered least, such as children, the elderly, people with disabilities. It is crucial to understand whether the impact of a design or policy decision will further marginalise these people or whether it will increase their participation in the life of the eco-city.

### References

Roberts, John. *Genius Loci - How Is It Retained or Revived?* Proceedings: Eighth Annual Pedestrian Conference, City of Boulder Transport Division, Boulder, 1987, 90.

David Engwicht's *Towards an Eco-City* is published by Envirobook, Sydney, Australia.

*Note:* Sections of this article appeared in *Chairs in the Street*, an article by David Engwicht published in issue Number 66 of *Chain Reaction*, the magazine of Friends of the Earth, Australia.