

Short Paper for Ecocity World Summit

*Richard Register, conference co-convener, has written short essays to augment his talks at the Seventh International Ecocity Conference. These do not follow the particular words of the talks as the talks are from notes, not scripts. These short essays are designed to encapsulate some of the more important thoughts. This one supports the **Opening Session of the Academic Conference**, Tuesday, April 22, 2008.*

Basic Questions about Ecocities

Almost none of this interview was published so Tracy Quek, writer for the Singapore Straits Times, said feel free to use it. Strikes me as clear, wide ranging and a not bad introduction to some ecocity basics.

Q. How would you explain to the man in the street what an eco-city or low carbon city means or refers to? Mainly green technology being employed or a whole new lifestyle or both?

A. Both. An ecocity is simply an ecologically health city. Today's cities are making life systems on the planet – the ecology of the planet – very sick. Even the atmosphere and oceans are developing a fever, heating up. Animals and plants all around the world are dying because people have not been noticing that the way we build cities for cars instead of people is backfiring. Now some people are saying, "Hey – something is wrong. We have not been noticing that this invention called the automobile and its entire support system – highways paving the planet, housing scattered across agricultural land and deep into natural places, gasoline, oil, wars for oil and on and on. All this has been a big mistake." We can build cities that are very different and very healthy. That kind of city is called the "ecocity." In its design and functioning it is informed by ecological principles: assiduous recycling, maintaining maximum biodiversity, being very efficient in energy and materials, having a compact

generally three-dimensional form like complex natural living organisms.

Q. It seems to me that eco cities in China are becoming very "fashionable". I'd like to ask what has led to the interest in building such "eco-cities" or low carbon cities around the world and in China?

A. Many things: environmental awareness. Climate change. Massive traffic congestion. Half a million traffic deaths on the streets and highways per year, though that one is – odd though it seems to me – the one taken least seriously. Perfectly good alternatives that have been neglected for 30 or more years such as the basic ideas of ecocity and even going back to ancient positive examples of compact pedestrian cities around the world – way back hundreds of years. There is the Garden City idea from the turn of the 19th to 20th century, sensible solar energy technology, bicycles working so well... All that has been ignored while people tried against all serious evidence that it can't be done, to make cars "better" as an excuse to keep driving, paving the world and living way out on the fringes of the bad old city. Actually, the *old* city was pretty good! Meaning the compact city of enormous diversity at close proximity, that you could walk around and get almost everything you wanted at close proximity in, without expenditure of vast treasure on machines and gasoline and crazy infrastructure like whole giant buildings to park the cars in called "parking structures." The evidence that we need to deal with this has been building up for a long time. The amazing thing is that it has taken us so long to look the beast in the eye – and of course most people aren't really, but rather being dragged by events against their will to start thinking about it.

Q. So eco cities have a long history around the world? Or are they an end of 20th century phenomenon?

A. Very long history. At our Ecocity World Summit conference we will be having an archeologist who has worked on the first city ever, Çatalhoyuk, Turkey, which is 8,000 years old (actually a large town, but with great diversity of structure and function compared to anything earlier or for the next 3,000 years – fantastic place). Early cities were low energy cities lacking cheap, large

quantity energy itself and machines to utilize it, but therefore they are useful for learning about towns built around the human measure, like the old cores of many European cities still there today.

Venice, Italy founded around the 9th century, is car-free – a pedestrian city linked by water and bridges. Compact, mixed uses at short distances. A good structural start on ecocities, but no solar or wind energy to speak of.

The Garden Cities of Tomorrow around the turn of the 19th to 20th century were a self-conscious attempt at cities more harmonious with nature, probably marking the earliest modern ecocity efforts. In 1970 Paolo Soleri founded Arcosanti, Arizona, the first thoroughly integrated ecocity effort, which he called an “arcology,” for architecture and ecology conjoined. It is planned to be car-free, solar powered and largely food-self-sufficient by intent, though it is only a small fraction of the way toward completion.

Other efforts such as Jaime Lerner’s in Curitiba, Brazil, produce many innovations from reclaiming streets from cars for pedestrians – in modest number anyway – and establishment of excellent transit, thorough recycling and a great deal of nature restoration – all that has been heading in the right direction. The Chinese are trying a number of designs, such as Dongtan, planned for an island near Shanghai, utilizing high degrees of recycling and renewable energy but still burdened with many cars. I’m trying to encourage a full spectrum ecocity, something complete like any complete and healthy living organism. Arcosanti was conceived as such, but not the more recent efforts. All give too much to the vehicle and not enough to Earth-anchored and imaginatively designed architecture. They need to be more “place oriented,” less built around vehicles.

Q. What needs to be assured or done or put in place to ensure that eco-cities and their communities sustain over a long period of time?

A. We need to establish and start expanding car-free zones in cities and expanding their size while removing development where we can that is very dependent on cars.

Stop expanding highways and streets – period! We’re talking moratorium on all new highways and streets. As asphalt

becomes prohibitively expensive soon, making streets narrower and planting where asphalt used to be will make ever more sense. Take the bicycle seriously – on a flat surface it is 8 times more energy-efficient than walking. Shift money from building highways, supposed to advance prosperity (while paving the real source of prosperity that is the productive surface of the land itself and the miracle of photosynthesis on it) and instead invest it in rail systems.

Spend that money that currently subsidizes sprawl development on mixed use, higher density development to vitalize even more the centers from downtown to district to neighborhood scale that are already lively or could be with a little serious investment. These will become the cores of new ecocities, ecotowns and ecovillages.

Spend that money on buying and removing housing that is far from those centers. Restore nature and agriculture there. Since governments and developers have been building in these completely energy-unconscious places since the 1950s we will have to start removing first the houses in those areas that are in bad shape due to termites, mold, fire and general aging, when wood gets brittle and nails are rusting.

Stop building housing in areas that require massive land utilization and lots of cars and lots of energy. The energy won’t be there in the not so distant future and the land has much better uses than to serve as a platform for launching humanity’s project to wreck atmospheric stability and destabilize temperature. Al Gore has done us a big service to wake us up to the climate change problems but he needs to go the next step beyond changing light bulbs, recycling better and inflating tires on cars more so they will get better gas mileage. It’s time for him and all the climate worriers to get on board the ecocity movement. They can lead it as far as I’m concerned. I couldn’t manage to lead it 40 years ago. Maybe they can now.

Q. Eco cities seem to be catching on in both developed and developing nations. Are there differences in the needs for, application of such projects in a developed country (say Britain) and in a developing country (say China or India)?

A. First of all I’d maintain they represent sincere efforts to build better, as well as

means to capitalize on a changing public mood and cash in on a trend. But I don't believe we have any ecocities in existence yet and I don't see them on anyone's drawing board.

But regarding needs... Very different needs. The rich countries need to be a lot less rich and the poor countries need to be more prosperous and both have to understand that prosperity isn't what it's cracked up to be. It's current definition is destroying the world. Absolutely no joke.

Only now are we beginning to realize it with world wide pollution, collapsing species diversity in extinctions of whole species everywhere, half a million people torn, crushed and burned to death by cars every year, wars for oil and the rapidly growing and nagging notion that coming Peak Oil might actually really mean something for us in terms of economic, social and cultural collapse. It might mean something not very nice! The insanity of comments by Alan Greenspan, former head of the US Federal Reserve, that the world needs the "stability"(!) of "maximum sustainable economic growth" has to be seen in relation to a planet if big, only so big. When we begin realizing what is really going on, then we will understand that we are like bacteria growing out of control in our Petri dish in our old high school biology lab. Until we slam up against the glass wall that looked like the infinite expanses of dreamland.

That's all it has been - grow, grow, grow - because we were ignoring ecology and imagining that glass clear limit of outer space isn't a limit: dreamland. It may not be for a space ship, but it certainly is for an mass energy civilization buildable on Earth.

Q. Do you foresee eco-city projects eventually spreading out from specific cities or sites to becoming a widespread thing in times to come?

A. The ecocity is inevitable. Either we figure it out pretty soon and they could be some pretty vital places from large size down to redesigned villages with complex culture, or nature will take charge and they will be small, bleak and probably pretty brutal places - but run on low energy and recycling assiduously because all other choices will be gone. That ecocity, the ecocity by default, will be recycling the dregs instead of the treasures. The ecocity by design could be humanity at its best.

What we are in now is humanity's epic close call race. It could go either way.

We have been doing very badly considering the real concepts of "sustainability" that were glanced at in the early 1970s - ecologically healthy cities, solar energy, recycling, getting rid of toxics, support for biodiversity - were all swept up in opportunistic tokenism and recently phony "sustainability" verbiage that refuses to look at basic issues of over-consumption, over-population, eating too high on the food chain and not the least of the big four, building the wrong kind of city, physically the very wrong kind of civilization.

Almost everyone would prefer relaxing behind the wheel of a Prius to straining the brain over redesigning the city and maybe actually moving from a single family house into an apartment or condo. Nobody looked at the phenomenon of growth in a limited environment, by limits meaning outer space that envelops the biosphere on one side and the stony, gravelly, sandy bottom layers of the planet's soil on the other. That's the thin substance of the bubble of life we live within and the only magic gift from outside is the flow of energy from the sun. That's it. If we the people continue kneeling at the alter of the economists, if we maintain their apocryphal religion of growth while calling some version of it "sustainable," they - and we too - will do violence simultaneously to both language and the future physical state of this bubble of life. Here, economy flails absurdly against ecology, the rules of life. Growth cannot go on forever, and the ecocity shows how we can actually shrink for prosperity so that once again we can share this planet with others.

The ecological city is a way to shirk back to something reasonable in size and aware of the real world it lives in.

Q. So the ecocity solves all problems...

A. Building the ecologically health city is only one of the major components of a solution, along with reducing population peacefully, reducing consumption and learning how to give back to the Earth, be generous, invest in the future. But it is absolutely crucial and amounts to the physical enterprise that has a serious chance of changing the definition of prosperity and making room for regeneration of healthy

natural and agricultural systems.

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www.ecocitybuilders.org*

Q. What's your prognosis for planet Earth?

A. The jury will be out, as they say, on this one, for a little while longer. But it won't be that much longer as we approach the end of cheap energy, the end of Africa's rich biodiversity which includes the last grand megafauna on the whole planet, the end of most or all real fisheries. What is beginning to happen now – early signs of collapse, Jared Diamond might say – may well prove that humanity is guilty of negligence in not changing city structure until too late. And then of course, if economic collapse hits, go look at Detroit for hints of things to come – but on a planetary scale and much worse. Read "The World Without Us" by Alan Weisman. Maybe not that far-gone but likely closer to that than what we have now. On the negative side, though, negative for us, Weisman poses a planet that suddenly experiences our absence right now. But we will be doing a lot more damage for quite some time before total cultural collapse or a milder version of it. That's a real possibility for changing city structure in a way I don't think people would like to see: as a stage for the gods of chaos and foot soldiers of starving gangs to govern, strutting and fretting pathetically about a stage with no Shakespeare to write about them, the human experiment going down in tragedy and farce at the same time. I certainly hope that is not the case, but the half-way "ecocities" in development now are not going to do it.

They still celebrate cars if supposedly better ones. They are still counting on massive flows of cheap energy, if from better sources and in a world of better building material and more thorough recycling. That's far from enough. They are half way there at best and if you don't get over the threshold you don't get into the new and healthy world on the other side.

Tracy Quek: Thanks very much Richard. Call if you would like to add anything.

A. What I would like to add, dear reader, is that these ideas I find absolutely impossible to get past magazine and newspaper editors. They are not new. They have been around for a long time. They are being stonewalled most thoroughly.