

## On Sustainable Design

*"Sustainability is less about saving the planet then it is about saving ourselves "*

Our society is living beyond its means. In the space of a few lifetimes, we may dispossess the Earth of the capital assets upon which we depend for our long-term survival. Though principally anthropocentric in nature, sustainability is predicated upon interconnectedness and upon constraining our material needs within recurrent natural resource flows.

Sustainability implies permanence. It is providing for our needs in the present without diminishing the prospects of future generations.

Sustainability is defined within a regional context. It is afforded by the sun, wind, rainfall, and surface geology of a particular place.

Sustainability implies diversity and vitality. Many of the large hierarchical pyramids of social organization that characterize contemporary society require large energy inputs to support themselves. These will progressively deteriorate. They will fracture into numerous, smaller jurisdictions, re-asserting what Schumacher describes as their "subsidiary function" - (a more humane and efficient organizational state in which the freedom and responsibility of lower formations is carefully preserved). Correspondingly, localities will become more productive as their subsidiary functions are re-instated. This new-found productivity will be geared to satisfying more local needs from local resources.

However, sustainability eschews self-sufficiency. We are a society that historically has committed resources to trading goods and ideas from beyond our sphere of influence and it is reasonable to expect this to continue. Self-sufficiency implies isolation and is therefore inconsistent with this aspiration. Furthermore, the larger the social and geographic unit, the greater its internal variety, and the greater its resilience. There are population thresholds to be reached, economies of scale to be considered, just as there are subsidiary functions to be respected. An enquiry into sustainability considers the appropriateness of scale as much as it does the appropriateness of technology

To date, sustainability has mostly been considered either at the inter-national level in terms of resource policy, or at the homestead, "eco-house" scale in terms of appropriate technology.

Sustainability is a radical concept. It will involve major changes in the way we live our lives. However, these changes will not be imposed, rather, they will evolve. If one accepts a link between energy flow and the maintenance of a set of social values, then a change in the social

order is inevitable as society moves to a lower energy level. Truly sustainable communities will be those in which technologies and lifestyles evolve in tandem. As Pierre Dansereau concluded in one of his CBC broadcast lectures, " the richness of our *inscapes* is preliminary to a good management of our landscape"

How much more productive could land in and around suburban and provincial settlements become? What are viable technical solution concepts for such development? How might communities (and the society of which they are a part) be organized to achieve this end? What would such settings look like? Would we be worse or better off in a renewable energy-based sustainable society? Does less available energy mean a lesser quality of life? What would our choices be? What new opportunities would open up, and what present options would close? How would we spend our day?

These questions are as compelling as those which kindled the Garden City conception of Ebenezer Howard and the Radiant and Broadacre ideals of Corbusier and Wright.