

Academy of Village Design Project Overview



In order to appreciate the need for an Academy of Village Design, some preliminary understanding needs first to be integrated. This understanding is based upon recognizing two fundamental principles:

- 1) The Age of Oil provided the means, through cheap and available energy, to allow the proliferation of settlement patterns that are vastly unsustainable. Whether in the dense concentration of cities, the institutionalized sprawl of suburbs, or the dispersed piecemeal agglomeration of rural areas, these patterns can only persist with a continuous influx of cheap available energy. Any future scenario that includes 'energy descent' – that is, downgrading to conditions of less available energy – will require the re-organization and retrofit of these existing settlement patterns.
- 2) The perennial 'village,' with all its intrinsic multifarious characteristics, is the most sustainable of settlement patterns and is therefore the model to emulate during any re-organization and retrofit scenario.

These two principles stand as axiomatic, the basis for all subsequent inquiry. I have produced a copious body of literature over the years to substantiate these principles. This body of literature is available through the website of the Village Design Institute – www.villagedesign.org. Once these principles have been integrated, it becomes apparent that the comprehensive solution for an anticipated scenario of 'energy descent' requires the articulation of "Village Design" as both a coherent body of knowledge and a systemic process of re-organization and retrofit.

There does not yet exist anywhere in the world an institution devoted to these goals. There are, of course, in these days, numerous initiatives attending to one aspect or another of the overarching theme 'sustainable community design,' yet nowhere am I aware of an effort to place all these aspects into a rigorous, multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional, whole educational package that can lead to professional development in this emerging field. This absence opens up the niche for an Academy of Village Design. The Academy of Village Design will have as its purpose educating and training professionals in the emerging field of Village Design.

When I say "Village Design," I am thinking of three primary applications: ecovillage, urban village, and rural (oftentimes described as 'traditional') village. While each of these applications is relevant to particular contexts, they all share the incorporation of the same basic Village Design principles. In order to illustrate the

different contexts in which these variations may be occur, it will be useful to speak about each in turn:

- 1) Ecovillage – The Ecovillage is primarily a “research, training, and demonstration site,” a sustainable community prototype. For the past 30 or 40 years, various ecovillages have been popping up around the globe as the vanguard of the sustainable community transition. Each of these ecovillages emphasizes, to varying degrees, the four pillars of sustainability as defined by the Global Ecovillage Network – Economic, Ecological, Social, and Worldview (or Cultural-Spiritual). The purpose of the Ecovillage is to demonstrate how the various leading-edge technologies of these four pillars may be integrated and applied in a real-world community setting; as such, the Ecovillage is inherently an educational model. Indeed, thousands of people every year flock to the Ecovillages to learn about the various aspects of ‘sustainability’ and to experience what it’s like to be on the vanguard of planetary evolution. The Ecovillage, however, is generally conceived as an “intentional community,” a close-knit group who has come together for a specific purpose – and this limits its universal applicability, for the majority of the world’s population is not yet ready to immerse themselves in social experimentation of this kind. Nevertheless, the ecovillage has a real purpose, for the proliferation of “research, training, and demonstration sites” in existing communities all across the globe is urgently needed.
- 2) Urban Village: The Urban Village could be considered the fundamental retrofit pattern for the transition of existing cities to a more sustainable form – and sub-urban areas also could be included here. The term “Urban Village” is currently enjoying widespread support among the planning profession; however, in a recent doctoral study which included a broad survey of this usage, I found the applications consistently falling short of their potential. Part of the reason, I believe, is that urban planners are generally not educated in broad, trans-disciplinary, systemic thinking – yet another reason lies in the fact that the concept is still a theoretical construct, lacking specific examples to draw from. In far too many cases, the term Urban Village is being applied to frivolous developments like “upscale shopping districts,” or is simply relegated as an expression of the far more conceptually limited “New Urbanism” idea. In a book entitled *The Urban Village: Synergy of Ecology and Urbanism*, I presented in some detail a more systems-oriented approach to this emerging theme that would give it more of the qualities of a real village. For example, each Urban Village ought to have a well-defined center and a well-defined boundary, and ought to begin moving towards instituting internal economies, agriculture, and political self-determination – in short, each Urban Village ought to become a

sustainable unit unto itself. In the palette of Village Design applications, the Urban Village still has enormous potential for creative conceptualization.

- 3) Rural Village: I often used to insist that the 'traditional village' is the model to emulate; however, I've been around the world enough now to realize that the 'traditional village' is more a sentimental reminiscence than an actual operational reality. Through the medium of 'globalization,' pop consumer culture has infiltrated every nook and cranny of the globe, and 'traditional villagers' everywhere are scurrying to throw off their perennial ways so that they may appear 'modernized.' Unfortunately, modernization in this sense usually means superficially adopting the external trappings of progress while consequentially undermining traditional sustainable ways. In this process, the people are indiscriminately and wholeheartedly infusing the very *unsustainable* ways from which educated people in the developed world are attempting to extricate themselves! The sad irony is that the former traditional villagers will never be able to achieve consumption levels – and the satisfaction that these are supposed to bring – that the developed world has come to take for granted. Nevertheless, the basic pattern of 'traditional village' the world over still has intact essential infrastructure that will enable a scenario of energy descent to be far more painless than it will be for random assemblies in the civilized world lacking this infrastructure. As such, whether in Tuscany or Thailand, there is still much to learn from the perennial village pattern.

Perhaps now, by understanding the applications, it will be easier to recognize the nature of both the coherent body of knowledge and the systemic process of re-organization that will constitute the curriculum and the pedagogy of the Academy.

Curriculum – What does one need to know in order to design a sustainable village? The prevailing academic strategy of gaining expertise in one particular discipline simply will not do! Quite to the contrary, the competent Village Designer will need to be able to access many fields of knowledge simultaneously; thus the curriculum for the Academy is inherently inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary. I approached my self-designed B.A. – “Village Design: Ekistics for the 21st Century” – as if it were to be a proto-curriculum for this emerging field, so the basic structure of that curriculum would be a good place to start. I chose as the overall theme “Human Ecology.” This over-arching theme was split into three branches: “Physical Human Ecology,” “Social Human Ecology,” and “Applied Human Ecology,” or Permaculture. Physical Human Ecology was subdivided into two categories: “Natural Sciences” and “Natural Processes,” while Social Human Ecology was more diverse, including the categories “Psychology,” “Anthropology,” “The Arts,” “Spirituality and Religion,” “Economics,” and “Human Relationships.” Each of these categories had at least four and up to eight course titles within it. For example, Natural Processes included the course titles: Patterns in Nature, Bioregionalism, Ecological

Design, A Pattern Language, Geomancy/Feng Shui, Systems Theory, Introduction to Organic Astrology, and Awareness through the Body. Some of the course titles were offered at the university; those that were not, yet which I considered to be vital to an education in Village Design, were organized as Independent Studies.

The point here is not to suggest that every course title I chose to place in this proto-curriculum would be relevant for everybody in every application; this is, however, an heuristic example of a ‘whole systems design’ approach to education. The overarching branches and categories listed above may be replicable, in the similar way my current doctoral program uses a core set of “Knowledge Areas” as a framework. The purpose of the curriculum is to provide a broad inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary introduction to the fundamental principles one needs to know and integrate in order to become a competent Village Designer. Specific course titles in a program at the Academy would be adapted to an individual’s inclination and goals; however, a core curriculum should remain mandatory.

Very important is the inclusion of the Applied component to the curriculum. As knowledge is gained, it is translated into *knowing* through application and the modification of behavior. In my case, I had a chance to travel to various sites around the globe and participate in real projects while taking courses organized by pioneers in the field. I also took the opportunity to study some traditional villages. This is a precedent worth repeating because it strengthens the network and provides cross-cultural perspectives. In the Academy, students will initiate design applications – at multiple scales and in real world contexts – from the very beginning of their programs; thus “design,” as a discipline, will need to be one of the core knowledge areas.

Pedagogy – Pedagogy describes the process of teaching. In this regard, I wish to refer to the original Academy, Plato’s. In the original Academy, there was not a firm distinction between “students” and “teachers:” everybody was considered to be self-motivated learners at various stages of inquiry. The primary pedagogical tool was ‘dialogue.’ Small groups working on similar problems would engage in conversation for the purpose of bringing to light and clarifying the nature of the problems. ‘Dialectic’ was a special form of dialogue in which a series of questions would be posed to a learner for the purpose of sharpening thinking. One would expect that both dialogue and dialectic would be most productive among groups of individuals who had read widely beforehand; thus, there will be an inherent scholarly appreciation at the Academy of Village Design. Unlike many academic programs, where reading can be followed by writing in an almost private exchange, the new Academy will foster a process of extensive reading followed by expansive dialogue *before* the writing. All three stages are essential – and with such a multi-disciplinary curriculum, the reading, dialoguing, and writing could range widely indeed, yet would always remain centered upon the 1 fundamental problem: how to create sustainable communities at village scale.

While reading, dialoguing, and writing exercise primarily the left hemisphere of the brain, the pedagogy at the new Academy will give equal measure to exercising the right hemisphere – and here I am speaking of fostering an atmosphere of unbounded creativity. While it is generally known that activities such as drawing, painting, and playing music stimulate this left hemisphere, it is not so widely known that storytelling also can contribute to this function. We can imagine a lively campus setting with ongoing musical concerts and theatrical performances orchestrated by the students themselves, followed by mysterious storytelling around the campfire at night – this is how mythologies are generated! All this creative activity finally gets focused and structured in the Design Studio, where students begin applying their developing knowledge and burgeoning creativity to the solution of actual design problems. The methodology in the Design Studio will emphasize sketching and freehand drawing, and the production of detailed site plans with manual tools. Computer-aided graphics will be used only to prepare presentations for the public, including city councils.

Nature and the apprehension of natural processes also will be included as pedagogy; after all, Nature is the primary model to study in the design of sustainable communities. In order to grasp the essence of natural processes, gardening will be practiced by everyone. Here, students get a chance to plant seeds, and then care for them as they sprout and grow. Soil needs to be prepared and beds tended. Companion planting will be practiced, with annuals and perennials alike, until diverse polycultures are formed. In my opinion, there is no better way to study Nature than to observe how these polycultures grow and interact over time. Permaculture is introduced to encourage systems thinking at the interface of natural and human systems, where plants, animals, energy, construction, water catchment and waste recycling are all conceptualized as a coherent, inter-connecting, sustainable whole. Finally, depending on the season, students will harvest the plants and animals they have cultivated, creating meals and value-added products for themselves. I used to like to say, “How can you design a sustainable village without first knowing how to cultivate a thriving garden?”

One more pedagogical strategy needs to be introduced in this Project Overview, a strategy that can be summarized with the expression “whole body awareness.” Effective design is understood as a process engaging *all* the senses; it is not merely the outcome of the implementation of a set of theories contained in the head. The new Academy will be a place where ‘consciousness’ is understood as a whole-body phenomenon; as such, there will be a deliberate focus not only on exercising the body (what the Greeks used to call ‘gymnastics’) but also on maintaining attention to body awareness throughout diverse activities, including design. For my upcoming doctoral dissertation, I intend to design a Design Studio process that can be framed as ‘yogic’ practice. This will become a distinguishing characteristic of sustainable community design as practiced at the Academy of Village Design – for ‘yoga’ means union, union with the Divine.

This has been an overview of the curriculum and pedagogy that will be instituted at the Academy of Village Design. Now, what about the setting, including the actual physical characteristics of the site?

Such a program obviously will work best as a residential arrangement – a model “ecovillage” in the sense of “research, training, and demonstrate site” for “sustainable living in community.” Faculty and staff will have their respective residential clusters; there also will be two residential clusters set aside for “students” – thus four clusters total, oriented to the four directions. The residential clusters will be situated around a multi-use community building at the center. This “community center” will house office space, an industrial-grade kitchen with adjoining dining hall, laundry facilities, mailboxes, a recreation room, a music room with recording equipment, a HAM radio station, child care, and guest rooms – similar in function to the central house of a co-housing arrangement. As such, it is assumed that meals will be taken communally and the community center will be the nexus for domestic activities. Upon the grounds adjacent to the community center will be a “green,” dominated by a solar-powered outdoor stage with plenty of dance space, and flanked by a volleyball court, various tables and seating arrangements, a barbecue pit, a substantial kitchen garden, and a playground for youngsters.

Situated at some remote walking distance, depending on the size and characteristics of the site, will be the educational complex. Included here will be classrooms, a well-stocked library with reading rooms, a state-of-the-art computer lab, and a full-featured Design Studio full of drawing tables and all sorts of artistic media. Within the confines of the educational complex will be found demonstration gardens and test-plots, a large multi-purpose greenhouse, and a large multi-purpose workshop. We may also imagine outdoor classroom space for the fairest of weather.

Situated at some other remote walking distance from the community center will be found the “ashram.” Here will be located the meditation hall, a studio for yoga and tai chi, and adjacent rooms for the practice of the healing arts, including massage, ayurveda, acupuncture, energy work of various modalities, and wholistic counseling. In an earlier version of this Project Overview, I described the ashram as being the “yin” component complementing and fulfilling the “yang” presence of the educational complex. In this sense, spiritual practice is understood to be an integral and vital aspect of not only “living in community” but also of understanding the more subtle dimensions of “sustainable community design,” for there was an integrating spiritual core to every traditional sustainable village culture.

As a Project Overview, this paper is not the place to indulge in too much detail; yet there remain a couple more points that ought to be covered in order to get a more complete picture of the project as a whole.

First, the student body: The Global Ecovillage Network formulated a vision they called “Living and Learning Centers.” These were to be organized as a network of educational complexes spread out across the globe, comprising many of the existing ecovillages and also including potential “research, training, and demonstration sites” like the one being described here. As a network, students would have the opportunity, resources permitting, to travel from Center to Center learning and integrating whatever specialties were inherent to each particular site. The Academy of Village Design would serve as a strong anchor in this network since its ‘specialty’ is offering rigorous multi-dimensional education in the Fundamentals of Village Design. Such a program would be ideally suited to complement existing university degree programs or to become a comprehensive accredited degree program of its own. Thus the student body would be a lively mixture of inquisitive learners at various stages of inquiry and commitment, and comprising in totality an international cast. Faculty and staff would be the permanent residents, ideally building equity through their participation.

The second closing point elucidates the significance of the term “demonstration site.” The first big design challenge will be designing the Academy itself – for this will become a place where people come to see how it is done, how all the various systems of ‘sustainability’ are integrated together into a working whole. Yet beyond that, this Project has the chance to explore virgin territory: recently I’ve become fascinated with the prospect of ‘designing for consciousness.’ This is an idea still in gestation, yet some of the principal features include creating an environment that optimally stimulates the nervous system, incorporating “sacred geometries” as the foundational layers to the site plan, and practicing various geomantic arts, including Feng Shui. The opportunity exists to have manifest a finely-tuned energy field, a vibrantly pulsating dome of light wherein consciousness is expanded just by moving about the place. These qualities would make the Academy of Village Design an educational center of the highest order, a gateway into the 3rd Millennium.

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