

## **EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY**

Summary by Adrian Hornsby

Bright out of Communism, the global tilt of the past two decades has been toward greater self-dependency. From "light-touch" governments, to banks which "self-regulate", to "participatory development" in the global South, to local community police in London, to the freshly-connected and brilliantly unique internet user – and then interactive internet user-blogger – there is a continuous thread of empowering people to manage themselves, and through that, to manage the whole. It is a curious mixture of the bottom-up and the private interest; a combination of ideals of market-democracy and parochial engagement.

Thus faced with a problem as nakedly collective as global warming, a large part of the global response has focused on individual responsibility and low-level action. On the one hand, the carbon-trading market has opened the door to companies balancing their own profits and emissions. Equally, the public has stood to shoulder its portion of the burden, with punters scrutinising their own activities for sustainability. Notably food purchases have become a highly political and environmentally conscious act, as have holiday choices, transport decisions, thoughts over home gardening, and (bless our souls) burial ground selection, with specialist green undertakers offering consumers a range of ways to die sustainably.

The opportunity for homeowner-lifestyle engagement with sustainability ideals has played also into the urban realm, with increasing numbers of council-level environmental services. Private developers and town planners too have been alive to the opportunity to tie green interests to renewed thoughts about localism and community, and have collectively responded with "sustainable development" in the form of "eco-towns" and "eco-neighbourhoods".

The jagged gulf between the rhetoric and the technical truths could hardly be greater. While appealing to both consumers and retailers alike, the concept that we can eco-shop our way out of global warming is patently ridiculous. Lavish media attention upon green-products and "do-able" home-owner responses such as re-using plastic bags have inevitably cloaked bigger structural issues (issues such as may suggest bigger responses, which in the recent freewheeling deregulating Web 2.0 times, are inevitably less media-sexy). This form of evasion, or even hoodwinking, has been equally apparent within urbanism, aptly expressed by the covert oxy-moron of "sustainable development" itself. In particular, the green belts and leafy lanes of eco-towns and sustainable suburbia are frequently characterised by increased cosmetic greenness at the same time as increased associated carbon emissions.

This relates not least to a fundamental misalignment between how urban planners draw, and what urban people do. Notably, and in spite of any number of carefully designed self-sustaining satellite developments and mixed-use office-residential districts, where people live and where they work, within a single urban network, show little better than random correlation. Remote clustered expansions tend if anything to put more stress upon the city centre, with all the concomitant environmental and economic disadvantages. Given this basic fact, there is considerable cause to dispute the very concept of sustainable suburbia. It is simply at odds with how people behave.

At the same time, taking advantage of how people behave may well offer a route to significantly enhanced environmental performance, of both urban areas and of individual buildings. That spurious media coercion can convince people to grow their own lettuces in order to save the planet at the very least demonstrates the latent power of engagement and participation. In particular, a debate rages between "smart systems" and "active users": is it more efficient for example to have electronically controlled motion-sensitive lighting systems, or simply to encourage the doctrine, last person out of the office kills the lights? Equally, while local communities have comparatively little traction in terms of work and even leisure choices, proximity can be a basis for environmental systems, such as combined heat and power (CHP), and local schemes, such as car sharing.

Participatory democracy is relevant to the sustainability agenda on two key fronts: there is the political engagement with macro-issues, and domestic engagement with micro-activity. Vagueness and spin predominates in much of the meso-region, clouding from the bottom level what the macro-issues are; and from the top level what the micro-activities are. Greater transparency of information, and a more critical application of thinking, will be vital for a more effective application of democratic means to environmental problems. Indeed they are the means to shore up our popular if now waning faith in everyday democracy.

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