

The green movement is maturing, but there's still much to be done

Sustainability is now considered to incorporate everything from urban agriculture to social equity

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As I write this article, leaders from around the world are grappling with the issue of climate change at the Copenhagen Climate Summit. It seems like a fitting way to end a decade that brought carbon, climate and the related urgency for change to the consciousness of much of the world.

While there are people who continue to debate these issues and others -- including peak oil and food security -- it is hard to deny that we need to do things differently.

According to Patrick Condon of the James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Liveable Environments at UBC, Vancouver has an opportunity to be a leader, rather than just a follower, in the transition to sustainability, particularly as it pertains to North America.

"Whether we recognize it or not, the Vancouver region, in many respects, is leading in a number of sustainability areas," he says. "The region is on the verge of rebuilding itself as a much more sustainable region."

As the stories of this past year suggest, this sustainability also continues to grow beyond discussions of just energy and environmental protection. It is becoming an increasingly holistic approach that includes everything from urban agriculture and social equity to the preservation of cultural diversity.

Two years ago, a dramatic rise in the price of oil not only resulted in a temporary 40-per-cent increase in the price of fruits and vegetables in Vancouver, says Condon; it also brought widespread attention to issues around food security. This past year, B.C.'s locavore movement continued to grow, with a voraciousness more typical of weeds than vegetables. Urban agriculture and its many faces -- community gardens, rooftop beekeeping, backyard chickens and farmed medians -- particularly buzzed and blossomed.

The SOLEfood Urban Farm Raising was an initiative of United We Can's SOLE -- or Save Our Living Environment--program and organized by Projects in Place, a Vancouver organization that brings people together to work on environmental initiatives. It attracted more than 100 volunteers who converted unused parking spaces off East Hastings into planting beds.

"Urban agriculture ends up being increasingly important," says Condon. Not only does an estimated 25 to 30 per cent of the world's greenhouse gases come from the agricultural sector, reliance on well-travelled food -- including apples that now come from China -- could seriously jeopardize many people's ability to afford food, let alone eat healthily, in the face of dwindling oil resources.

While Condon argues that there continues to be a disconnect between many citizens' interests and habits, despite the increased awareness, the growing integration of issues such as urban agriculture into community planning and green building guidelines could help change this.

For example, among the additions to the newest version of the Living Building Challenge, released just last month by the International Living Building Institute and the Cascadia Region Green Building Council, is the requirement that there be a minimum amount of square footage dedicated to food production on a

development site.

While there are exceptions for the densest of urban environments, the more suburban a site, the more food production that is required.

The Living Building Challenge, and particularly its most recent incarnation, is the first green-building certification program that attempts to bring together a broad range of issues -- urban farming, transportation, social justice, etc. -- and to give them equal weight.

When the Living Building Challenge first came out, many considered it extreme for most projects. Today, however, the program arguably illustrates the type of integration people want, and ultimately need, in order to create change.

"I think the green building movement is trying to broaden its scope again. It is growing up and maturing," says Jason F. McLennan of the Cascadia Region Green Building Council. "For the past couple of years people have been talking about urban farming and issues of equity in green building, but we didn't really know how to deal with it, or what to do with it.

"We do have the ability to make significant changes to all these issues," he says. "We have in the past. Once we view it as possible, a lot of things open up."

He says that in Portland, the Living Building Challenge has already helped facilitate change to policies and bylaws that previously prevented more sustainable development, changes that include grey-water recycling and rainwater collection.

Both McLennan and Condon note how critical such policy changes are to creating a sustainable future.

While the public engagement we are seeing is encouraging and indicative of a changing landscape, in order to create large-scale worldwide change it is imperative that government practices and policies encourage and allow new ways of thinking and doing.

The growing groundswell of public engagement and the implementation of critically needed outside-the-box integrated thinking will either continue to flourish or falter as a result of policy.

While Condon is one of many people who question the province's commitment to public transportation and reduction of carbon emissions in light of the expanded Port Mann Bridge and the Gateway project, he is optimistic about Vancouver's future.

"The activities of a place like North Vancouver, which has been, and continues to be, the most progressive city in the region, is a very hopeful sign," says Condon. Among other things, the city has established a "100-year sustainability vision," a move that earned North Vancouver an award from the Union of B.C. Municipalities.

Change can often be unsettling and challenging, regardless of how much sense it may make. However, as the Living Building Challenge demonstrates -- and as any dedicated locavore will tell you -- it is only by challenging our notions of what is feasible that we can discover what is possible.

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