

Global and community-based sustainability: making it happen

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‘To affirm life and integrity of the world is to reinhabit it just as it is, via the local modality of place... It is to embrace our own role in those unfoldings, both at the level of sustainable practices and at the level of communicative exchange...’ (Matthews, 2005)

David Arkell explores the emergence of a new project which concretely manifests the principles of sustainability. It shows how government, business and education can work together on global and community-based projects. Key to its success is the galvanisation of hearts and minds through reflective practice – emotional participation.

WELL, talking about sustainability all sounds very nice – the right thing to do. We cannot ignore the signs of our times. And high profile debate (even rhetoric) is important in terms of increasing global and local awareness of the challenges facing us. But I believe that the essence of living sustainably, at this particular moment in time, means fundamental and radical change – now, for yourself, others and for future generations.

I’ve come to this conclusion through my immersion and intimate involvement with a radical, public-sector led project – the SmartLIFE project.

This is a large-scale international sustainable development project funded by the EU Interreg programme. It began from a simple but catalytic idea that local government must become involved in building affordable and sustainable homes and communities. Where would we start? Given the emphasis over the last decades on market relations in the public sector, the obvious route for us would have been to contract this out as a financial venture. We, however, chose the route of change, and determined to stay in keeping with the principles of sustainable ideas. Rather than working in a market way, we chose a more creative way of inter-

preparing policy by developing open, extensive, local and international partnerships to promote and build our capacity to supply sustainable homes and buildings.

We began by developing a co-creative partnership between Swedish, German and British contacts, and then put forward our grant applications. The complexity of the policy documents created impatience in our team, which actually helped us develop the determination to cut through the fear of ‘getting it wrong’. Fortunately, our application to the EU Interreg programme was supported by the UK government and provided the vehicle to move quickly.

To develop this project on sustainability meant that we needed innovation not only in the supply of products, services, training and skills, but also in the demand for these – which meant the fostering of a community who really bought into the notion of sustainability. So a vital part of our early success was the cross-fertilisation of disciplines and ideas, especially through exchanges of students, teachers, businesses, consultants, and politicians. We soon discovered that this was not a project rooted in a single sector (construction) but a cross-discourse, multidisciplinary approach pivoting around a real community-owned sense and reality of place.

We were working at every level: the project brought together different cultures, disciplines, governments, politicians, legal systems, finances, as time and place fused in an imaginative act translated into the highest level policy combined with local action in the streets of Cambridge in the UK, Malmö in Sweden, and Hamburg in Germany.

The Triple Helix interventions – education, business and Government

We were successful in securing EU backing and so this simple idea of building sustainable homes for community, and not relying on market forces of agency had translated into a massive project that worked on three different levels – education, business and Government. Further, the exciting thing about the project was that our vision was created not just locally but also internationally. In brief, our aims in the UK, Sweden and Germany were, and still are, the following:

- Supply training, education and qualifications in modern and sustainable construction principles and techniques – Supplying hundreds of trained construction workers (16–19 year-olds) who are equipped to deliver sustainable buildings but also ambassadors for sustainable development.
- A business development and exchange platform to bring architects, planners, educationalists and industry together to challenge conventional work and progress innovation
- A major conference and seminar location for sustainable development
- Three exemplar and interconnected ecological buildings that showcase sustainable buildings
- A knowledge base and partnership sparking new ideas and projects for sustainable development
- Evaluations and promotion of sustainable buildings (including the construction of 106 SmartLIFE homes in the UK)

These aims are not just knowledge – they combine knowledge and practical manifestation

We are at a time of huge change and confusion – not about the facts of climate change *per se* but where to invest and how to change things at street level. The SmartLIFE project works across levels and hierarchies. It breaks down barriers and boundaries and concentrates on what is needed. It involves the powers, funds and motivations of a vertical (levels of government) and horizontal (education, business and governmental sectors) partnership to make a substantive intervention on the supply side of sustainable development, and connects with a local economic, environmental and social need for sustainable development on the demand side.

SmartLIFE is a physical and emotional nexus for different people to (re)interpret sustainable objectives in the built environment.

This was created through developing a clear vision and shared passion. The key for us in building and developing SmartLIFE is by maintaining a balance between our passionate commitment to the purpose of ‘common good’ in the public sector, whilst still managing the necessary commercial partnerships to deliver our product (sustainable homes) to our customers (community). In this way, we found, and are still maintaining, a way of really creating community, even within the constraints of the market sector.

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Evolution of the SmartLIFE business platform to facilitate change

I believe SmartLIFE's success is in the way it moves away from the imperatives of capitalist growth, and centres on people and their basic need for shelter, housing, and homes. We worked with the economic, social and ecological through connecting with the emotional and practical aspects of people's lives. The SmartLIFE story is a leading example of collaboration of the public and private sectors. The success of exchange of experience and learning has been a therapeutic education process, so that our innovative thinking has developed into a type of 'social enterprise service'. The 'easy' route to commercialise the public sector intervention (which we could have followed slavishly) capitalising (literally!) on our power as public sector buyers, has been replaced by a shared emotional drive to maintain the spirit of community enterprise. We have built, from public sector values, a not-for-profit enterprise managed by a public controlled Board with licensed partnerships with other sectors. This raises funds to sustain the SmartLIFE business and its position in the marketplace. This structural position is as important as the work outputs themselves, and is central to collaboration for sustainable development since we cross all sectors and knowledge – a win-win-win for public, private and education sectors.

The barriers of financial, legal and other conventions have sometimes held things up, but for the most part people rally round the project's purpose, providing extra support in the search for positive results. Political support has grown through our own communication and the tangible results that we have already achieved. As one senior official put it at a recent meeting in praising the significance of the project and its centres, 'SmartLIFE is sustainability you can kick!'

Of course, this story is full of the challenges of working together as flawed human beings – working with our own personal ambitions and yet maintaining the community project. It contains tales of ups and downs, emotional crises, conflict. Many individuals involved in SmartLIFE have contributed a great deal and then progressed onwards in their careers (taking the SmartLIFE experience of practical sustainability with them). What SmartLIFE offers is a partnership which encourages the flexibility to include different players, all of whom offer their own particular approaches. This is

a powerful feature which sustains and nurtures a radical vehicle for delivering sustainable projects that are meaningful both to the project workers, and the people they serve.

Not a concept, paradigm or even a particular world view – pure life blood

This project has also had a personal effect. For me, sustainability means caring about everything that we do with the earth, everything that is of the earth; within the bounds of whatever we think is our cosmos. It means caring about the world, the planet, our lives, futures and our very lasting existence as human species. This existence should be at the core of how we act in the world, in an effort to connect the human soul in a community of sustainable living. I do not want to appear romantic or overly simplistic but if sustainability is our goal, there is no alternative hypothesis, or do-nothing option. There must be more and more a re-connection of body, mind and soul in channelling emotional energy into essential change. Whilst our project is the concrete one of housing – it is crucial that this is led, not by commercial motive, not by pure rhetoric, but by a united activity that brings together people, planet, cosmos, soul.

Sandra Wooltorton (2006), writing for a SmartLIFE-sponsored book, calls for a 'reconnective learning' to tackle the rhetoric–reality gap. There is inevitably tension and paradox here, but it is this very tension of working together with these paradoxes which provides the passion for transformation of ourselves and our environment. We need to become reflexively aware of the effects our actions have on the environment and on each other. SmartLIFE continues to progress through being a physical, operational and independent meeting space that welcomes open innovation and imagination. At the centre of the project is the lifeblood of young people (16–19 year-olds) learning sustainable crafts and modern ways of sustainable building. Now we are developing projects to interconnect this to the veins of schools curricula, higher education and business entrepreneurs to embed and engender a low carbon economy working towards carbon neutrality.

Interconnective ivory towers in the field

I am fortunate enough to have a job that allows me to practise sustainable development at different levels in the local and international contexts. This is supported by the part-time doctoral

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research I am carrying out into developing a reflective way of engaging emotions in the workplace. Together with my colleagues and partners, I am discovering things about interconnective relationships that, by their feedback mechanisms give us power to move towards sustainable outcomes. I am convinced that it is these relationships, built on ever-growing awareness, which are the life blood and driving force behind these projects. What before was either bureaucratic and/or market driven leading to red tape and passivity, has now truly engaged the lives and souls of providers, workers, and community. With this engagement is a formidable release of energy that can be utilised for the public good.

The frontline community project work on SmartLIFE and other projects opens up a debate across international perspectives whilst we share practical visions. Similarly my research community has local and international perspectives within academia. Sustainability in the twists of the triple helix demands that our base of 'knowing' is participative: this crosses disciplines, cultures, levels of activity. It needs multiple methods of inquiry and multiple voices to be heard within our societies and projects. This way, we can tap into that lost, intuitive, knowing process alongside our growing scientific knowledge about issues of sustainability. It is about making the science meaningful so that it touches people's lives – otherwise, what motive is there to change?

No conclusion, onwards knowing

Finally, let me pay reference to the writer Abram who has spent many years studying older cultures. For him: 'When reflection's relatedness in ... modes of experience is entirely unacknowledged... reflective reason becomes dysfunctional, unintentionally destroying the corporeal, sensuous world that sustains it.' We have lost so much of this contact with the sensuous, that our planet earth is beginning to show the damage. We must embrace and embody all our senses to reform relationships with the conceptual, experiential and soulful (mind, body, spirit) so that together we can innovate and collectivise sustainable behaviours and living. If we can learn again to care for ourselves and others then maybe together we can enable the 'bringing forth of a world.' (Maturana and Varela, 1987). This must be a co-creating with imagination and soul – so that we reflect on our actions and begin to know how we know in a process of 'turning back upon ourselves'.

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References

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The SmartLIFE project is engaged in just such a process. SmartLIFE continues to grow, through its connections with our own senses, with one another, and with the earth and materials with which we work. In this way, it is sustainable in its business offering, and in essence sets about to 'reinhabit reality' as a platform exemplar for individuals and communities to learn how to lead sustainable lives. For all of us, it is a learning and a re-learning. A co-reflection on our creations, and hopefully provides a caring connection from the past, via the present, into the future.

