

The Rest of the Sustainability Story

In case you've slept through the last 18 months, we have fallen into economic chaos. What the economy will look like at the other end no one knows. The biggest risk is that we won't learn from what has already happened.

The one lesson we should have absorbed by now is that we have to commit ourselves unequivocally to sustainable development, not just for the sake of the environment but also for our economy and our social and cultural resources. First, though, we have to get our definition straight. Environmental activists say sustainability is saving the rain forest and the snail darter. LEED activists say it's solar panels and waterless toilets. In fact, it's more than either of those. It's also economic, social, and cultural responsibility.

What would a truly sustainable economy look like? It would be based on local assets and provide measurable local benefits. It would depend primarily on small business. It would take a long-term view of development. And it would acknowledge quality of life as a major component of competitiveness. An example familiar to planners is downtown revitalization. The typical approach is to tear down and start over. Yet new construction creates far fewer jobs than rehabilitation, and new materials require huge quantities of fossil fuel. Rehab consumes little in fossil fuel and uses local labor, benefiting both the local and the regional economies. There's no doubt which is more sustainable.

Still, I don't want to exhibit the same myopia as those who claim that a gold star from the U.S. Green Building Council equals sustainable development or that providing a bike rack is worth as many LEED points as saving a historic building.

Still, sustainable economic development must advance the cause of the environment. But consider what happens when we diligently recycle our soft drink cans while acquiescing in the destruction of older, still usable structures. Razing a two-story masonry building wipes out the environmental benefit of recycling almost 1.5 million aluminum cans. And that equation doesn't even consider the loss of embodied energy in the building and its components.

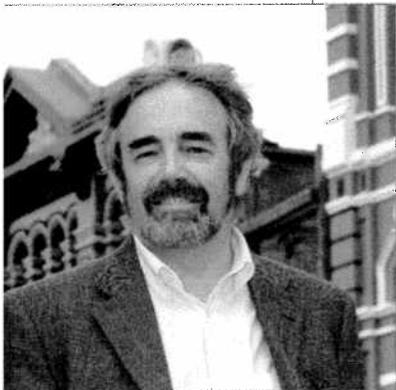
I see another component of sustainability as even more important. That's the educational, aesthetic, cultural, and social values that enrich our communities. The sociologist Robert Bellah wrote that "we can speak of a real community as a 'community of memory,' one that does not forget its past." Our historic fabric is the physical manifestation of memory.

Today cities around the country are racing each other to see who can adopt "green building" ordinances the fastest. Not surprisingly, places with activist reputations—San Francisco, Berkeley, Santa Fe—are leading the way. And what are they doing? Encouraging or mandating central vacuum systems, back draft dampers, bicycle racks, and waterless toilets. Yet the Sustainable Santa Fe plan includes not one word about ensuring the preservation of the city's wonderful historic buildings.

Perhaps we should look elsewhere for our model, to Iowa. The city of Dubuque is in the process of designating a 28-square-block warehouse district as a pilot project for a comprehensive Energy Efficiency Zone. The adaptive use of the warehouses, say local planners, is a key contribution to the state's commitment to energy conservation.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against LEED certification, solar panels, or storm windows. But every fifth grader learns that conservation means recycling, reducing, and reusing. What does a solar panel or a storm window recycle or reuse? Nothing. Both might reduce energy use, but much of that savings is offset by the energy used to build the damn things. For an aluminum storm window, that means 126 times more energy than to repair an existing wood window.

Now you have the rest of the story, a broadened concept of sustainable development that includes environmental responsibility, economic responsibility, and social responsibility. Planners committed to the idea of sustaining places need to balance all three.

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APA has launched a new theme for all its activities: *Sustaining Places*. For more, see www.planning.org.

Credit: Courtesy Donovan Rypkema