Ecovillage Design Education Meeting

Spring 2004 – Findhorn, Scotland

● Report of the Proceedings ●

From the 24th to the 29th of May, 2004, at Newbold House, an annex of the Ecovillage of Findhorn, an international cast convened for a precedent-setting purpose: to lay the foundation for the “Ecovillage Design Education” (EDE). This diverse, experienced, and talented group came from six continents, representing a good share of the world’s premier ecovillage models, and included some independent educators as well. By the end of the five-and-a-half days, guided by the sure and steady facilitation of Will Keepin from Satyana Institute and complemented by the dynamic co-facilitation of May East from the Findhorn Foundation, consensus was reached on the following points: 1) the general outline of the curriculum with an Action Plan for working out the details, 2) a strategy for implementing a four-week Training of the Trainers (ToT) course, at which time the proto-curriculum will be given its first test run, and 3) considerations for funding, promotion, and accreditation. A Steering (Stirring) Committee was nominated to coordinate follow-up work, including the delegation of appropriate subcommittees.

Of course, the vision for such an education had been bubbling within the greater Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) community for quite some time, and two previous formalized meetings had already been held. This particular meeting was purposefully designed to be leaner, swifter, and goal-and-task-oriented so that tangible, workable results could be realized in a relatively short time; and we believe this was achieved.

Contributing to the productivity of this meeting was the considerable group-process finesse embodied in the participants. Specific process guidelines were agreed upon in advance, as a formality; yet for the most part the group was able to keep moving forward in concert as a whole.

Also contributing to the success of the meeting was the peaceful setting: Newbold House is a stately old mansion nestled among the pines, with extensive gardens and orchards, often accentuated by the call of the dove. Thus there was a sense of quiet verdant stillness conducive to a deep, contemplative state of mind. There we enjoyed relative isolation, free from the distractions and busy-ness of an ‘outside world,’ and so were able to concentrate single-mindedly on the tasks at hand. Newbold’s friendly host community
served up delicious vegetarian meals – with many of the greens coming from their garden – and was very attentive to the comforts and needs of the guests.

This meeting sustained a high vibration by the interweaving of proposed Spiritual-Cultural components of the curriculum into the very proceedings. For example, there was a twenty-minute meditation session after breakfast, to open the daily events, and before dinner to close them, in addition to the optional morning meditation in the Sanctuary. There also was a plentiful mix of fun and play and games along with, or as a means to fulfilling, the practical work. Beginning with the introductory session and interspersed throughout the gathering were numerous occasions for singing, dancing or movement, for interpersonal sharing or connecting, and, generally, for putting a heartfelt human face on what was primarily planned to be serious productive business. This was effective and creative facilitation: The community-building and inner attunement, the invocations and subtle rituals – not to mention the boisterous goofing off – actually seemed to enhance or support the productivity. Warm friendships could be initiated or nurtured in an environment of mutual trust, respect, and purpose. There was a collective feeling of participating in something vitally crucial for the healing and positive evolution of the planet. What could be more spiritual?

And of course, as always at Findhorn, the white candle was ever present illuminating the center, placed on top of a blue flag of the Earth.

After the introductions, Will set the tone with a presentation about emerging paradigms in science – such as Bohm’s implicate order – that seemingly corroborate with wisdom from ancient spiritual traditions. Most other participants also gave presentations at some time during the meeting. For example, Ross Jackson gave an interpretation of the greater economic context and Hildur presented her latest paper: “Integrated Ecovillage Design.” Most of the presentations were visual reports from the ecovillages that these participants call ‘home.’

After consolidating common ground by brainstorming Vision, Mission, and Objectives, small groups self-organized to evaluate the various strengths and weaknesses of existing ecovillage education programs, and then went on to highlight the important or desired elements of the new education. These were critical sessions: since each ecovillage already has its own educational programming, and since the ‘ecovillage’ by its very nature is an educational setting, it was necessary to clarify just how the new education will be integrated: For which audience(s)? With what content? What kind of organization and structure? The nature of the relationships?, etc.
As perceived by the group, each ecovillage surely will continue to host its own (more or less) vernacular, place-based, site-specific educational programs. The EDE will be overlapping, augmenting, or interfacing with these existing programs as a (more or less) standardized, systematized, or globally coordinated educational initiative – with the unique ability to be holographically adapted to fit into a variety of space or time frames. This will give the Ecovillage Design Education enormous flexibility and range, so that it can, among other things, eventually expand into a two- or three-year diploma program, with various modules undertaken at participating ecovillages at various times.

At this point, it’s worthy to mention the contribution of Andy Langford from the Permaculture Institute of England who has devised and diagrammed in some detail a permaculture education that begins with a formal presentation of theory, principles, and ethics, and then advances onto an extended internship of practical application, culminating in certification. The group thought that this was a useful model upon which to structure the EDE.

Further contributing to the effectiveness of the meeting was a balance between plenary and small-group time. The small groups were able to accomplish a lot in a short period, whereas the plenary was a bit more cumbersome, yet there the ‘group mind’ could be employed to address overarching themes and underlying values. Of course, both were essential in their own way. There was some debate, however, as in any healthy meeting, and most of that revolved around the relative importance or weight of “Spiritual” versus “Economic” in the curriculum. Indeed, this proved to be the most significant issue of the entire week. Another sensitive area that stimulated recurring attention was the debate over the explicit inclusion of sexuality and gender issues into the curriculum.

As per the antecedent model first displayed in the Ecovillage Living book (Gaia Trust, 2003), the various modules of the curriculum were to be represented as ‘spokes’ on a ‘wheel.’ The original version had just three dimensions (to a comprehensive ecovillage design education): Social, Ecological, and Cultural-Spiritual, with a few economic terms sprinkled in among the modules. At the plenary of the EDE meeting, however, there were insistent voices for making “Economic” more prominent. The reasoning was that this will attract more funding options and will promote credibility and collaboration among (potentially) influential decision-makers. It was pointed out, for example, that the United Nations uses a trisected wheel to define Sustainable Development with the categories of Social, Economic, and what they call ‘Environmental.’

The better part of two days – May 27th and 28th – were devoted to working out the (re)arrangements of this wheel. At one point it was suggested to move the “Spiritual”
dimension into the center, since it infuses or is inherent in all other aspects of the curriculum. This idea went so far as to imagine the three other dimensions spiraling out from that spiritual center. In a rather weary yet dramatic late afternoon session, this new proposed model was put up for a vote: There was one Nay and an abstention, thus no consensus – “Spiritual” must have its own place on the wheel. The process began anew; “Spiritual” held its ground!

The other necessary work on the wheel during those two days revolved around deciding just how many modules would be included in each of the three (or four?) dimensions and just what their titles would be. This discussion also went back and forth between the small groups and the plenary and was, perhaps, the most contentious issue of all; for, at this level of detail there is much room for the individual differing of opinions and priorities.

On the morning of the last day – Friday, May 29th – there was still no consensus on the arrangement of the wheel. As participants self-organized into their last sub-groups of the Spring 2004 EDE meeting, an air of determination permeated the room: we wanted to come out of there with a concrete proposal!

In the “Structure of the Wheel” sub-group the question arose, “What has been so sanctified about maintaining just three dimensions on the wheel?” From there it was reasoned that if we create four dimensions – in morphological resonance with the “Medicine Wheel” and other archetypal symbolic systems – then “Spiritual” and “Economic” could each have a place of their own. (Why didn’t we think of this before?) After that valve was opened, consensus in the sub-group congealed fairly rapidly, especially motivated by the felt need for expediency. At that time, the four-fold model was chosen because it would be most likely acceptable to all; and it was accepted – an eleventh hour compromise was reached.

There were some reservations with this compromise, however, with some maintaining that “Spiritual” spiraling out from the center more accurately portrays the systemic reality of the curriculum we are attempting to convey; and, it was thought, having “Spiritual” in the center actually gives it more prominence than simply including it as just another dimension on the wheel. This issue may resurface, especially if an aesthetic graphic might be created that accurately, vividly portrays the spiraling pattern envisioned.

As one function of the closing ceremonies of the Spring 2004 EDE meeting, it was agreed that we would offer a report to the ecovillage of Findhorn (apparently there were many in the community who were keenly interested in the proceedings and the outcome of our meeting); but this would be no ordinary report. In preparation, Lepre Viola, from
Damanhur, guided us through some hilarious theatrical exercises. Then, Daniel Greenberg had a prophetic dream about the structure of the ‘performance.’ Entrusted to his directorship, the group of ecovillage educators, with paucity of preparation, spontaneously reported the essential highlights of the meeting in a metaphorical skit that centered, of course, on ‘the wheel.’ (A film can be purchased of this skit.) Thanks to all those from the Findhorn community who came out to support us that evening.

Finally, on the last night of our time together, reminiscent of a Permaculture Design Course, we had a talent party at Newbold House. One by one the educators got up to display their stuff, and, somehow, the topic of sexuality arose again! At the creative and cultural pinnacle of the festivities, the daughters of May East and Craig Gibsone participated in a spirited performance of Beethoven’s “Freude shoner Gotterfunken” – the new European anthem. We were complete and full; the meeting was a splendid success.

But the closing of that meeting signifies the opening of a new round of engagement; for, a pioneering, leading-edge, holistically pedagogical (and sorely needed) international educational initiative has been offered up to the world. A multitude of work awaits, from numerous angles and perspectives, yet like they say at Findhorn, “work is love in action” – and this is truly a labor of love.

Currently, the Stirring Committee is actively and energetically pursuing the directives that came out of the meeting and is delegating tasks to sub-committees.

The Curriculum Committee has four coordinators representing each of the four Dimensions and is busy writing up and/or collecting curriculum proposals for the respective modules. Later this Summer, these proposals will be organized and synergized into a coherent whole.

The ToT Committee is busy canvassing potential times and locations for the Training of the Trainers course, where the proto-curriculum will be given its first test run. The idea is to have the educators and writers of the curriculum participate in their own designs as the first students. These graduates can then go on to teach others.

The Funding Committee also has been active and is drafting a proposal to present to the European Union.

The Promotion Committee is making preparations to produce a brochure and to set up a website.

It is very heartening to see the unshakeable commitment and unstoppable energy with which these volunteers – respected pioneers in their own right – have all come together to move this Ecovillage Design Education forward. The fuel that drives them is the conviction that they’re making a positive difference in the world, that they’re contributing
to the manifestation of a sustainable (if not utopian) future, that they’re leaving behind a noble legacy for future generations, that they’re directly influencing the salubrious evolution of the planet. It’s devotion really; it’s spiritual work. And I bet if you asked each one of these participant-educators why they do it you’d hear the same response: “There’s no choice really.”