

RESET DEVELOPMENTS

THE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF RESET, THE ECOLOGICAL BUILT ENVIRONMENT CHARTY



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EDITORIAL

This spring, social uprisings in north Africa and the Middle East have boosted the political temperature to record levels, as people take action for fundamental social and political change. Further east, over 13,000 lost their lives with 16,000+ still missing, when a catastrophic 9.0 earthquake and a 15metre tsunami hit Japan's north east coast. The subsequent crippling of Fukushima's nuclear reactors meant a 20km radius no-go zone, evacuation of 70,000+ people, half a million households still without running water, and the loss of one third of the country's total electrical energy supply.

Closer to home, the need to transition from 'resource wars' to 'resource strategies' was highlighted again by the driest March in over 50 years and the hottest spring on record. Although the challenges are great, hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up! In this issue, RESET explores the critical need for adaptive solutions internationally and in the UK. RESETer Nikki Linsell brings back valuable knowledge to share from our DFID-funded collaborative project with Practical Action Bangladesh and the Self Help Promotion Network on cyclone and flood adapted affordable housing (see pages 3-7).

With entry to the Integrated Habitat Design Competition open until July 31st, CIEF hosted a seminar with Dusty Gedge and Gary Grant in May on integrating habitats into the built environment, chaired by Alastair McCapra CEO of the Landscape Institute, followed by an evening reception at the SW1 Gallery's rooftop garden (see pages 8-9). The potential for integrating habitats into Passivhaus design is also discussed by UK practitioners Janet Cotterell and Stephen Choi (pages 10-11).

RESETers got a mad March tan on Evershed's green roof during the Living Roofs & Ecosystem Services course, while RESETers escaping the city smog headed for Wiltshire and a May Bank Holiday rammed earth course with Rowland Keable. We also tried to lower the temperature by having a refreshing drink with Mappamundi Design in April and the Datum Foundation in May, but ended up in a heated debate at Grand Designs Live! where Sir Terry Farrell, Steven Smith and RESET's Director Blanche Cameron discussed what we really mean by Future Adapted Cities.

To get involved, why not check out our summer training programme, apply for an internship, or join us at RESET Drinks on the first Tuesday of the month? Meanwhile, the RESET team wishes you a cool green summer!

A person is seen from behind, carrying a large, round, woven basket filled with dark, wet mud on their head. The basket is secured with several layers of colorful fabric, including red, green, and yellow patterns. The person's arms are raised, holding the sides of the basket. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and sunlight filtering through the leaves.

BUILDING BACK KNOWLEDGE

Words & Images | Nikki Linsell

As the World Reconstruction Conference comes to an end in Geneva, questions have been raised back in the UK about the withdrawal of government funding to UN-HABITAT, raising numerous concerns within the shelter sector over long term donor support for the built environment.

It is often hard to understand the contradictions with current aid-policy. On the one hand donors happily profess to the belief in ***'taking a longer-term view on development - addressing the environmental issues that matter most to the poor [that is] critical to achieving sustained poverty reduction'*** (DFID Environment Guide, 2003).

Yet on the other, programmes that focus on playing the 'long game' are penalised for taking this strategy because they are unable to quantify and validate, often politically-driven, short-term targets.

If the goal of foreign aid is to make itself redundant, one of the most important lessons from the last 30 years is that development strategies must be country owned and driven to succeed. Aid finance should be acting as an enabler to support societies design their own futures and shift away from the short-term micro-macro paradox of marketable product driven efficacious interventions, to an approach that invests in in-country capacity-building.

The challenge of sustainable construction, therefore, is about how one goes about inspiring, building and maintaining a sustainable knowledge base within a country, not who can design the best instant pop-up house. As Nabeel Hamdi (Building Back Better, 2010) recounts: "Instant housing 'solutions' are notoriously inappropriate in layout and technologies, particularly in relationship to habits and lifestyles".



Shelters in South West Bangladesh, 2011

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"Instant housing 'solutions' are notoriously inappropriate in layout and technologies, particularly in relationship to habits and lifestyles".

Nabeel Hamdi
Building Back Better, 2010



Shrimp farms in Bangladesh, 2011

“

Education is critical for the future of sustainable settlements and development. Education prepares a person for life”.

Shah

Emphasis on local training and education support is by no means a new concept. In 1995 it was Ian Davis and the Building for Safety programme, set up to help promote community self-reliance and to increase knowledge, that recommended advocating community-based training programmes for local builders. Only a year later this was reinforced by the Housing & Hazards workshop in Dhaka concluding ***“what is now required is a concerted effort to transfer the know-how to people who are actually involved in the design and construction of housing”***

(Choudhury, 1996).

Education is critical for the future of sustainable settlements and development.

“Education prepares a person for life” (Shah).

If we do really want to Build Back Better, then first we need to ensure that the local engineers, architects, supervisors, developers, builders and carpenters, who collectively shape the nature of construction have been given the right tools and support to do so. As RESET's research in Bangladesh continues, we hope to encourage and support this type of longer term thinking, even if the real impacts may take a little while to be seen.

LINKS

RESET Development

www.reset-development.org/bangladesh

World Reconstruction Conference

www.wrc-2011.org/wbwrc

UN Habitat response letter to DFID

www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/MAR/un-habitat-response.pdf

Housing and Hazards

www.housingandhazards.org

Raft-Network

www.raft-network.net



Construction Training, Bangladesh 2011

The 2 year project being coordinated by RESET Development, funded by UKAid, the Department for International Development and delivered by Practical Action Bangladesh with DHARA, is focused on developing a greater understanding on best approaches to training and education for sustainable, disaster resilient construction in the rural South West of Bangladesh.

The plinth of one of the four simple prototype houses shown. Construction, completed by the end of May, will be monitored and assessed over the coming year for resilience to flooding, cyclones and for its social, environmental and livelihood appropriateness.



Participatory Video Training, Bangladesh, 2011

Participatory Video Training by People's Voice in Bangladesh as part of the research project transferred techniques to tell local stories to a wider world.



With the help of People's Voice (part of Plastic Buddha Productions) a 3-day participatory video workshop was conducted to help train local partners and community members on how to record and produce short films to tell their own stories. These new skills will also support RESET's research over the coming year. You can watch some of the videos produced during this workshop via RESET website. www.reset-development.org

IHDC RECEPTION in sw1

Words Amber Parsons | Images Nikki Linsell



The **Integrated Habitats Design Competition** has thundered into its second year and looks to be garnering even more interest than the fledgling competition in 2010. The judging panel has now expanded to include Paul Collins (School of Architecture, Nottingham Trent University) and Peter Massini (Head of Urban Greening & Biodiversity, Greater London Authority). Run by RESET, in association with Dusty Gedge, director of the UK's independent organisation livingroofs.org and the ecologist and masterplanner Gary Grant, the IHDC has welcomed principal sponsor Victoria Business Improvement District for the 2011 competition.

Victoria BID, RESET and CIRIA hosted an IHDC Reception at the SW1 gallery at the end of May which was a roaring success.

Over a glass of wine and some delicious organic canapés, practitioners from across the built environment sector came together to discuss their hopes and dreams for the IHDC. Guests enjoyed a forward-looking and supportive introduction speech from Martin Kelly (MD, Capita Symonds) explaining his wish for Victoria BID to be an example to other London Business Districts in terms of their sustainable aims & objectives. This was followed by some excellent speeches from several members of the judging panel including Brian McDonald (Natural England), Peter Massini (GLA), Martin Hunt (Forum for the Future), Paul Schaffer (CIRIA) & Paul Collins (NTU) and a rousing two-hander from Gary Grant (Green Roof Consultancy) & Dusty Gedge (Livingroofs.org).

IHDC is still on...

Registration period 21 March - 31 July | Entry Period 1 May - 31 July

The IHDC is open to everyone. One of the main aims is to encourage an interdisciplinary approach that cuts across the engineering, architecture, landscape, construction and ecological sectors. The focus of this competition is to ensure that enhancing biodiversity and providing habitats is integral to the design of urban, suburban and rural built developments, working with nature to help us adapt to climate change. With 2011-2020 as the UN International Decade of Biodiversity we hope that the IHDC will provide a forum for visionaries and innovators to design better, more sustainable habitats for all of us.



Brian McDonald, Senior Specialist at Natural England & IHDC Judge together with Kenton Rogers, Co-founder of Treeconomics

Early-bird registration is open until 30th June with final competition entry deadline of 31st July. Visit www.IHDC.org.uk for more information and follow RESET on Facebook and Twitter for more updates.

Integrating habitats ...into Passivhaus Design

Words | Janet Cotterell | Stephen Choi

As the need to create integrated habitats into our built environment increases and Passivhaus design becomes more recognised in the UK, RESET asked two UK practitioners their opinions on the potential to integrate biodiversity into Passivhaus design. Janet Cotterell and Stephen Choi gave us an insight on the subject according to their personal experience.



Living roof on the single storey building of Devon House Project, CTT Sustainable Building Practice

RESETEting Passivhaus?

The Passivhaus standard differs from the Code for Sustainable Homes in its strict adherence to a single issue – the maximum reduction of energy needed for space heating. This correctly targets an area which we have been very poor in properly addressing during our history of eco-house experimenting.

The challenge must be to take passivhaus beyond this single driver, and look to how it can also integrate other aspects of our environmental challenge. The use of more natural and potentially locally sourced materials can be addressed relatively easily, integrating ecosystem services and encouraging biodiversity is more of a challenge. We generally fail to recognise the importance of ensuring that our houses and gardens create environments that are welcoming to more than humans. We now recognise that our capitalist economy has undervalued the natural environment. I was encouraged that architect John Christopher in his end of terrace ‘Code Six’ home in

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The use of more natural & potentially locally sourced materials can be addressed relatively easily, integrating ecosystem services and encouraging biodiversity is more of a challenge”.

Janet Cotterell

Chartered Architect & Certified Passivhaus Designer Passivhaus Homes Ltd.

www.passivhaushomes.co.uk

Balsall Heath, both achieved air-tightness of more than 10x the current building regulations standard (key to passivhaus) and also claims to have increased bio-diversity by 8+ species, including habitats for birds and bats.

Adequately learning the ecological needs of different animals & plants takes time, but is essential if we are to approach this challenge with any sensitivity and avoid the danger of token and poorly informed gestures.

Learning how to share our homes with a broader ‘family of life’ is an exciting and positive intention, and nature will always repay the effort made with the many undervalued but essential benefits its presence brings. Part of the reason of including a living roof on our passivhaus home in Devon is to demonstrate that passivhaus can be more than a hard nosed ‘mathematical’ based approach. The hope is that we can challenge this preconception even further on future projects.



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Building a Passivhaus building is like encouraging the right biodiversity-at first it will take more co-ordinated attention from the project team and cost a bit more upfront but the result is not only a higher quality of life for years to come, but cost-savings that continue to grow”.

Stephen Choi
Co-founder of Architecture for Change
www.architectureforchange.com

What has Passivhaus got to do with biodiversity?

At Architecture for Change, we are big advocates of the Passivhaus approach as one method of designing and delivering more sustainable buildings – with some of our latest work being the upgrade of fairly old housing stock into very high comfort homes. When I was asked to contribute to this issue of RESET Developments on integrating biodiversity and ecosystem services into Passivhaus projects, I was wondering – well, what has Passivhaus got to do with biodiversity? Not a lot it may seem at first, but thinking about it more there are a few important reasons to consider how one combines ultra-efficient buildings with the most efficient of all things – biodiversity.

The first one is somewhat obvious. Living roofs (and in some cases living walls) are often inherently effective as far as thermal and acoustic insulation goes. In addition to being visually appealing, the combination of soil, plants and trapped layers of air act nicely as barriers to heat and sound.

Secondly, the importance of filtering the air. In a Passivhaus with the windows closed this is done by mechanical ventilation with heat recovery (MVHR). In a Passivhaus with the windows open (yes you can open the windows!) there is one great way of filtering the air and that is simply by planting, both inside and outside. The similarities? Both MVHR and planting can change room temperatures and their successful integration into building projects needs to be thought about in advance by the whole project team. The differences? The former requires regular maintenance,

usually some space in your ceiling void and needs boosting when you have lots of friends around. The latter can be low or maintenance-free, adjusts to the seasons on its own and in 99% of cases looks more attractive. In an urban-based Passivhaus, you need both.

On the subject of airtightness there is a fear that very low energy buildings will have no capacity to host birds and bats. This rather unexpected outcome is no doubt a challenge, but it is possible to make conscious decisions at an early stage of design to encourage biodiversity, such as roofs that allow bats to roost.

Another connection between Passivhaus buildings and biodiversity is controlling overheating whilst maximising useful solar gains and natural daylight. Well-designed Passivhaus buildings take into account nearby planting and how it changes over the seasons. Allowing in light and heat where and when you want it is critical to a good building and integrating surrounding trees into the design is an excellent way to support this aim whilst giving the occupiers something good to look at and often some much-needed privacy and shelter from the wind.

Finally, the business case. Building a Passivhaus building is like encouraging the right biodiversity – it will take more co-ordinated attention from the project team and cost a bit more upfront but the result is not only a higher quality of life for years to come, but cost-savings that continue to grow. And with that extra money and consequently time perhaps one can find a moment to tend the allotment?



Mediterranean cities, such as Santorini (photo) were conceived in symbiosis with their environment, with thermal mass, green infrastructure and clever water management giving great adaptive ability and resilience through the ages, even when appropriated by different civilisations and under different legal constitutions.

Dimitra Kyrkou
RESET Design Officer
photo by TravelPod

Future Adapted Cities

Words | Blanche Cameron, Dimitra Kyrkou

“And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time... What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning”.

-T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*.

During one of the hottest, driest springs in the UK on record, countries in North Africa and the Middle East have been creating new beginnings, and putting an end to their former constitutions. These human ‘disturbances’ have also been a beginning for the whole world, realising the importance of cities’ global as well as local social networks and that we can connect and relate to the issues affecting people’s lives in and around the cities under disturbance.

Further east, a natural disturbance occurred in March, when a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami hit Japan’s north east coast killing thousands of people and leaving more than 80,000 without shelter, water or food, and forcing

evacuation under the threat of radiation. None of these disturbances could be considered purely ‘local’, with their impact on the world highlighting their global relationships.

However, the lessons learnt from these disturbances do not only involve the immediate local or global impacts of the problem, but the significance of the side-effects as well. As cities are networks, these disturbances make us think not only about social and political issues but also about our environmental future as well. The social uprisings in the North Africa and Middle East are related to social issues, such as poverty and access to fundamental goods and services, but also access to natural resources such as food and water, livelihoods and self-determination for the future. In spite of attempts to prohibit global communication, media and online social networks spread the word about this collective action, and reminded us how much a city needs its networks – including social, communication and ecological networks - in order it to function.

As cities grow in population, they draw in resources from across the world, impacting on natural ecosystems and expanding to absorb local land area. While the challenges of overheating, flash flooding, loss of biodiversity and water and air pollution are great, the possibility of transforming cities offers a worthy mission, with the hope of achieving sustainability as its aim. So while we defend the social and communication networks that are under threat, this also seems a crucial time for people to rethink how we can ensure a safe future for the world's natural resources and ecological networks.

According to the UN's 'Cities as Sustainable Ecosystems' initiative: "the best innovations in human history have arisen by learning from and modelling natural systems". One of the challenges of our era is therefore to align ourselves with nature and reform urban systems so that they mimic the metabolism of nature. Future adapted cities should be based on a holistic approach to water and energy use and energy generation, through innovative local solutions to environmental problems including increased efficiency, habitat protection and integration, green infrastructure provision and raised public environmental awareness. Rather than devouring water, food, energy and processed goods, and then belching out the remains as pollutants, cities need to align their consumption with realistic needs, to produce more of their own food and energy, to minimise waste and put the remainder to good use, and to integrate natural habitats, for nature and for people.

The ecosystem services provided by a green built environment can support these multifunctional solutions, as they enhance a city's functioning and connectivity; a green and blue infrastructure network provides opportunities for cycling, walking, movement of insects, animals and birds, water and fresh air, amongst a host of other benefits.

Examples all over the world have proved the effectiveness of building a city's future on ecosystem services. From Philadelphia's "Green City, Clean Waters" movement to Graz's Green Net, Malmo's Adaptation Action Plan to the Mayor's Plan for London, cities around the world are adopting green infrastructure. Countries coping with political uprisings and the economic crisis

might also realise an opportunity to help with these issues by realigning with nature. Mediterranean cities such as Toledo, Florence and Santorini were conceived in symbiosis with their environment, with thermal mass, green infrastructure and clever water management giving great adaptive ability and resilience through the ages, even when appropriated by different civilisations and under different legal constitutions.

In the Middle East, Abu Dhabi aims to become the 'Middle Eastern Oasis for Sustainable Transportation', by releasing Plan Abu Dhabi 2030. This plan calls for new national performance measures that respect natural resources, the fragile environment, air quality and liveability. A nation that has enough oil to last a lifetime has decided to "...cautiously use existing wealth, to actively explore renewable energy production, to reduce the consumption of non renewable resources." (Project for Public Spaces).

More than ever, there is a critical need for successful, sustainable solutions by envisaging human settlements in more positive ways, if we want to continue to reap the benefits of nature. In such a fragile era, we need to create successful sustainable cities, but also to apply the expertise to integrate cities into their bioclimatic settings, ensuring that we can meet our needs today for a safer future for our world. And if we take our relationship with nature seriously, we can certainly achieve this aim.

Learning to adapt

Words | Blanche Cameron

The majority of the world's citizens now live in urban areas. All that concrete and tarmac - Los Angeles alone sprawls across 4,000 square miles - means that summer overheating, air pollution and flash flooding are increasingly common. Sales of air-conditioners have rocketed in recent years and it's not about to get any cooler - Lisbon-style temperatures are predicted for London by 2020 as the world faces a minimum average 2 degrees rise in temperature. Cities need to prepare for this.

We also face a 'perfect storm' of problems, consuming limited natural resources at a record-breaking rate, polluting soils, air and water as we go, and producing an obscene amount of waste. Habitats and species are disappearing at a rate of knots, our climate is increasingly unstable and the planet's ability to provide future generations is rapidly diminishing. Yet we still prioritise endless economic growth, driven by consumption of raw materials, pretending that natural limits do not exist. As John Vogel famously said, we have privatised the rewards and socialised the risks.

The first law of sustainability is to align your self with nature. Buildings and built environments that integrate nature can also support biodiversity and provide ecosystem services for us too. These are the free natural services we rely on: natural cooling and fresh air (also reducing energy demand through shading and the transpiration of plants and trees), filtering water run-off, providing habitats for biodiversity, and in turn increasing our sense of well-being. And there are good precedents for this...

RESET's mission is the ecological adaptation of our built environment: expertise on useful



Living Roofs & Ecosystem Services 25-26 March 2011, London

A living roof tour and presentations on living roof design for biodiversity and ecosystem services, policy, challenges and benefits took place last March at Eversheds' London HQ, followed by a visit to Greenwich Peninsula and a practical masterplanning workshop on implementing ecosystem services into the built environment.

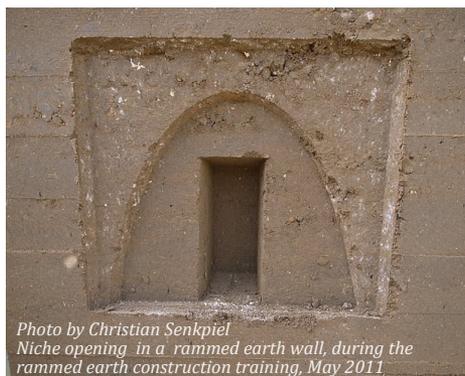
*Photo by Blanche Cameron
Dusty Gedge gives a tour on Eversheds' living roof*

and practical ways that people can respond to these challenges. At a detailed level this means employing the adaptation toolkit: creating cooler, fresher, less polluted environments that manage water and energy and support biodiversity and amenity. Water sensitive urban design means emphasising the value of living roofs, rain gardens and tree planting to urban spaces.

RESET's training programme is led by experts such as Dusty Gedge of livingroofs.org, Gary Grant the ecologist and masterplanner, the rammed earth expert Rowland Keable of Ram Cast, straw bale construction expert Bee Rowan of Amazonails, who change the way we think about the design, installation and management of our built environments.

The UN Decade of Biodiversity 2011-2020 calls for built environment professionals, not just to minimise negative impacts on our ecosystems, but to actively seek ways to restore these essential resources on which we all rely. RESET is working with the chartered institutions to develop aims that support this approach. This year RIBA has commissioned RESET to run core curriculum training on Ecosystem Services for Climate Change Adaptation and Healthy Communities, and has been discussing with other

institutions such as the Landscape Institute and RICS, at ways of incorporating an ecosystem services approach into design training. We don't have long to take action, and people are ready to participate and be transformational. In the same as the American Society of Landscape Architects has made the provision of ecosystem services their mission on each design site, we too need to look now at how we can design to support natural systems and processes – for the benefit of all.



*Photo by Christian Senkpiel
Niche opening in a rammed earth wall, during the rammed earth construction training, May 2011.*

To find out more about RESET training, please visit our website: www.reset-development.org



Rammed Earth Construction Workshop
27-30 May 2011

Organised by RESET, a Rammed Earth Construction Workshop took place at the end of May on a farm in the heart of Wiltshire, under the guidance of **Rowland Keable**. Participants had the chance to explore the principles and practicalities of rammed earth construction and to build a permanent sustainable 'rammed earth' structure.

*Photo by Blanche Cameron
Building with rammed earth during the training*

RESET Internship Experiences

Interested in gaining experience in the ecological adaptation of our build environment? Then, see what our currently interns have to tell you and visit our website: www.reset-development.org/internships

CLARE SMITH



Clare had been working in the environmental sector since graduating with an Environmental Science degree in 2007, on interesting but very varied projects, and found herself wanting to get more specialised knowledge and skills. Many people had suggested her volunteering as a good way to do this and she was then keen to find a volunteer/intern role where she could be developed professionally as well as contribute. After 6 months doing seasonal ecology work, Clare finally applied to be an intern with RESET, as RESET's work in promoting ecology in the built environment was related to what she would be doing and then being able to learn more about.

Joining RESET at the beginning of February, Clare's first job was to help get ready for the Ecobuild exhibition last March, where she helped on the RESET stand, explaining RESET's work and assisting with the Biodiversity Surgeries, building up more of a picture of conservation issues in the built environment.

Clare has also been helping with RESET's training programme and promotion of the courses, but also had the opportunity to attend a 2-day course on living roofs and ecosystem services, including visits to a living roof in the City of London and the Greenwich Peninsula, followed by a master-planning exercise! Clare was excited by meeting other attendees there, with different backgrounds and training than hers and by hearing their ideas too.

Over three months, Clare learned more about how a small charity runs and the different elements of RESET's work such as the IHDC, training courses and partnerships. Clare believes that a bonus of being a RESET intern is a personal development plan that can help interns identify the areas they are mostly interested in, which is really useful and helps to focus the work they do towards particular outcomes. As Clare is now coming to the end of her internship at RESET, she feels that the whole experience has improved her understanding of ecology in the built environment, as well as working with and meeting some fantastic and very knowledgeable people along the way!

Dimitra is an architecture graduate with postgraduate studies in Sustainability and Design and a deep interest in all sustainability aspects –social, economic, environmental- related with the built environment. Her studies investigated solutions for achieving sustainable communities, while her involvement within research programs offered her the opportunity to investigate the tools behind successful sustainable communities.

She thus decided to be part of RESET team, to further enhance her knowledge and experience in integrating habitats and enhancing biodiversity into the built environment. She would then be really happy if she could transfer one-day all that knowledge back to her home-country, Greece, and thus RESETEing there a new, more sustainable, reality!

In particular, within RESET Dimitra, as a Designer Officer, is responsible for designing and developing of trade shows and graphic materials needed for all RESET's developments. However, she is mostly excited and proud

DIMITRA KYRKOU



about developing the 'RESET Developments' Quarterly Magazine!

All-in-all, Dimitra believes that participating in RESET as an intern can fulfil everyone's hopes to expand their environmental knowledge to the built environment and develop a career in the environmental sphere within the charity and research industry, while working together with amazing people at a very friendly and non-working-like environment!

AMBER PARSONS



With a background in documentary film production & exhibition, Amber recently made the decision to move away from this sector and explore the career options in environmental sustainability. She was deeply influenced by The Age of Stupid, a film produced by Franny Armstrong in 2009, and felt a strong desire to engage with the issues it highlighted.

Since joining RESET to work as Campaign & Communications Officer on the Integrated Habitats Design Competition 2011 she has been utterly bowled over by the absolute commitment that the team here have for the causes that they believe in. Her initial brief was to produce a short film based on the launch of the IHDC 2011 at Ecobuild in early March and this was a fantastic introduction into the world of urban ecological adaptation. Since then she has been working to promote the competition through; direct marketing & PR, creating a healthy online presence and the planning & coordination of a high profile IHDC reception in central London.

There has been a lot to learn, in a relatively short space of time, about the built environment and its impact on the planet but without exception she has felt welcomed, encouraged and inspired at every stage. Amber is now confident that she would like to move forward and work in the field of sustainable advocacy and says that this is in no small part down to her utterly invaluable time with RESET.

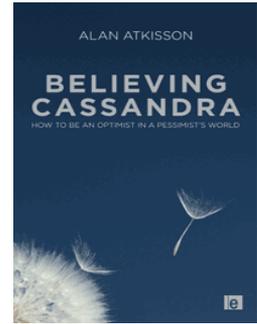
Believing Cassandra How to be an optimist in a pessimist world

By Alan AtKisson

Earthscan, 2010 (Revised edition)

BOOK review

Words | Clare Smith



In Greek mythology, Cassandra was the King of Troy's daughter; the god Apollo fell in love with her and granted her the gift of prophecy. When she could not love him in return, Apollo cursed her so that no-one would believe her prophecies. She tried to warn the Trojans that Greek armies were hidden inside a wooden horse, but they did not believe her and Troy was captured. In *Believing Cassandra: How to be an Optimist in a Pessimist's World*, Alan AtKisson likens today's scientists and environmentalists to modern-day Cassandras, shouting warnings which can seem to fall on deaf ears as people carry on with "business as usual" whilst damaging ecosystems to the point where they may not be able to recover.

It is the business-as-usual attitude that Alan AtKisson aims to challenge in the 2011 edition of his 1999 publication. Taking "Cassandra's dilemma" as the book's central theme, he explores the history of environmental awareness and campaigning, gives an overview of the major problems facing ecosystems and the scientific basis for predictions of "overshoot and collapse", and explores how to transmit the message of good environmental stewardship to motivate action.

AtKisson examines too our emotional responses to the ongoing stream of bad news about environmental destruction, which often paint a pessimistic and gloomy picture. He goes on to consider that most calls to radically overhaul our consumerist lifestyles have only led to minor changes, as there is a limit to how much is realistic for an individual to do within a wider society (even for committed environmentalists), and that we must overhaul society as a whole to organise it around a lower-impact way of life.

He argues that we must do this by uncoupling "Growth" from "Development" [his capitalisations to denote his particular definitions of the words],

and accelerate Development in order to create a society which does not destabilise natural systems. Growth is defined as the increase in human numbers and resource use, rather than economic growth, which he suggests will be able to flourish through Development, which is defined as the advancement of human innovation, creativity and technological progress.

AtKisson states the need to re-organise ourselves to pay attention to feedback from natural systems, using indicators to alert us to the effects we are having on the natural world to avoid the breakdown of supporting cycles and processes. He cites examples of innovation in cities and communities, such as Curitiba in Brazil and Gaviotas in Colombia where sustainable practices have been woven into daily life. He also reflects on how much has moved forward since the first edition of the book was published in 1999. Many ideas which were then marginal are now mainstream; environmental reporting has become part of standard business operations in many cases, and there are more environmental groups and NGOs than ever before.

Interweaving a diary-style of extracts charting his own progress through the environmental movement from childhood and hippy-ish early campaigning work to corporate motivational speaking, this is essentially a motivational text to encourage people to understand the rationale behind environmentalism and take positive action. For those who are already aware and acting, this will be preaching to the converted and it does not set out an in-depth framework, other than for the diffusion of ideas. However, it gives a good overview of the different perspectives on the issues addressed, and as the title suggests, provides a determinedly optimistic, if somewhat utopian, argument for a sustainable society.

I DON'T LIKE YOU BUT I HAVE TO BUY YOU A PRESENT.



©Sylvie Winn 2011
www.youtookthatwell.com

UPCOMING

The IHDC is on... www.IHDC.org.uk

Registration is still open

Registration Period

21 March - 31 July 2011

Entry Period

1st May - 31st July 2011

JUNE

Saturday 18th - Sunday 19th

DIY Green Roof Construction
Dusty Gedge & John Little
Landlife, Liverpool

Friday 10th - Sunday 12th

Self-Building an Earthship
Rebecca Sarll, Jon Kalviac, Paulina Wojciechowska
& Mischa Hewitt
Stanmer Park, Brighton in association with the
Brighton Permaculture Trust & Low Carbon Network

Thursday 23rd

Ecosystem Services and Healthy Communities
RIBA Core Curriculum, Gatwick

JULY

Wednesday 6th

Ecosystem Services and Healthy Communities
RIBA Core Curriculum, Swansea

Saturday 23rd

DIY Green Roof Construction
John Little & Dusty Gedge, Green Roof Training
Essex

AUGUST

Friday 12th - Saturday 13th

Straw Bale Construction 2-day workshop
Amazonails, London

RESET Drinks

7-9.30 pm, **The Apprentice, 16 Hoxton Square, N1 6NT, London**

JULY | Tuesday 5th

AUGUST | Tuesday 2nd

SEPTEMBER | Thursday 8th

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