

An urban planner and an urban ecologist walk into a bar. They chat about how (and maybe whether) "ecology" could play a bigger role in planning...



Many voices. Greener cities. Better cities.

15 Comments
Join our conversation



About the Writer:
[David Maddox](#)

David Maddox, PhD. is committed to the urban ecosystem and its importance for human welfare and livelihoods. He has worked at various levels of government, NGOs, and the private sector. He is Founder and Executive Director of The Nature of Cities. David is also an [award-winning playwright, musician, and composer](#).

[Web More From this Author](#)

Introduction

Urban planning (and the city plans that express it) is typically focused on coherently organizing city systems, flows of people and resources, where things are and should be. While parks, green and open spaces are usually part of urban plans (but there are exceptions), ecology and process are on the sidelines.

Much of the writing at TNOC addresses the essential ecological and social values that flow from ecosystem services, green spaces, and biodiversity.

So, should not a greater ecological sophistication be embedded within urban planning?

Should there not be ecologists at the center of urban planning teams in cities?

Of course this requires that ecologists get involved, learn about planning and its methods, and invest in the tradeoffs that are inevitably involved in planning something as complicated as a city.

Where are the examples ecology embedded in urban planning? How can it be done?



About the Writer:
PK Das

P.K. Das is popularly known as an Architect-Activist. With an extremely strong emphasis on participatory planning, he hopes to integrate architecture and democracy to bring about desired social changes in the country.

[Web More From this Author](#)

P.K. Das

Evolving a collective identity

As we have now settled down with drinks to begin our dialogue. May I suggest switching roles, the planners speaking as ecologists and the ecologists as planners? Would you agree that such an approach in our dialogue would strengthen our respect for each other and enable a robust collaborative understanding and endeavor for the achievement of a sustainable future?

Isn't it strange, though not surprising, as to how we specialists are categorized and divided, as much as people and places are constantly divided in the neo-liberalized and privatized world. Planners and ecologists too are assumed to be two separate and independent groups with a skewed assumption that matters relating to nature and environment rest exclusively in ecologists domain and planners are outside that. Shouldn't planning include and reflect matters relating to environment and ecology? Shouldn't ecologists engage actively with planning ideas and practices? Haven't we come to a stage when unification of knowledge and exclusive domains ought to be intertwined producing a paradigm shift in the way we think and understand and classify various matters pertaining to the sustainability question?

That only select individuals and groups have colonised or been trained to colonise the ecologist's identity is a matter of concern. Similarly the planners, besides lip service, have stood far away from dealing with critical ecological and environmental concerns. The fact is that nature in all its manifestations coupled with human development needs and aspirations ought to be referred to as ecology. This ought to be our worldview and must form the basis for the constitution of a collective identity. For such de-colonisation and comprehension would contribute significantly to the success of a sustainable ecology mission. Also, such de-colonisation would help in breaking the multiple barriers between people and the dominant mindset of segregation between development demands and nature, thereby enabling the democratization of ideas, plans and actions in wider environmental interest

Lets begin our discussion admitting that the failure to achieve sustainable ecology is a challenge to our collective capacity, capability and knowledge sharing ability across multi-sectorial concerns. And not just these two groups, but everyone.

So let's begin our discussion admitting that the failure to achieve sustainable ecology is a challenge to our collective capacity, capability and knowledge sharing ability across multi-sectorial concerns.

The question that then comes up before us is why just us two select groups? Why aren't we talking to other diverse people and contributing to wider public engagement and participation, undertaking active public campaign and dialogue? How can public action be mobilized, knowing that is what deeply influences decisions that governments take? How can the idea of sustainable ecology be popular knowledge, going far beyond the short-term daily life needs and demands however important they may be? Our real challenge rests in our ability to break these multiple barriers that we have over time consistently built that have severed the intricate and intimate relationships at all levels that existed.

De-colonisation of knowledge and exclusive domains is the single most difficult task for us, the various segregated "experts" or "specialists". It would destabilize us in many different ways—settled positions, complacency and our professional arrogance. Similarly, it is the larger phenomenon of constant division and fragmentation of towns and cities that worry us, for that too influences the expert's individualism. It is the individualism and self-gratification that stand in the way of integration and unification of people and places. We have realized how free-markets and privatization thrust under neo-liberalization and globalization have systematically promoted individualism and self-gratification, thus compelling us to intervene in the current political trend.

Therefore, it is crucial to consider and elaborate the ideas of sustainable ecology as fundamentally being a part of social and political construct. This is to go beyond the stereotypical understanding of many governments and experts in territorializing and barricading natural elements and areas for their protection and conservation. Ecology as a complex cocktail of natural and built environments and a way forward for their integration and unification are indeed our collective priority.

Natural elements and areas have been constantly abused, attacked, damaged, and totally destroyed across vast areas. Land and environment have been damaged to an extent that they have lost their regenerative capacity. As a result, human habitat is under critical threat. Living in towns and cities are increasingly becoming unsustainable, posing a threat to health and wellbeing.

The world over, across nations, we have attempted to confront and tame nature and natural forces, exhibiting our arrogance and power, sadly to miserable defeat every time. Yet we continue with similar effort while pursuing various projects under the guise of development. Governments and the ruling classes continue to plan and implement environmentally disastrous works, be they indiscriminate landfilling, destruction of mangroves, diversion of rivers and landfilling natural river beds, depleting forests, and so on. Build more syndromes led by real estate short-term interest is aggressively pursued with active government support, in spite of those projects in no way fulfilling the larger public interest.

Our challenge is to rebuild with nature and stop defying it. This would mean to re-envision our towns and cities and a paradigm shift in the way various works or projects are conceived and implemented. This would mean that many sections of our cities and towns would have to be done away with or remodeled from their established forms and locations to new ones. We have to together work towards gradually turning around our cities. Let us as a motley group of ecologists in this bar begin our work together by undertaking the task of preparing maps of our towns and cities for a sustainable future. This along with repairing, restoring, reclaiming, conserving, and nourishing all natural areas, elements, and conditions would have to be the immediate action plan.

Natural areas along with the necessary buffer have to be collaboratively mapped and open data relating to ecological relationships, including those that existed, would have to be registered. Development works have to be planned and implemented in response to all of these natural conditions. Re-establishing the ecological networks and relationships, including new ones, would form the basis of land use planning and development works. Carefully scheduled phased implementation based in such a new imagination has to be evolved and aggressively pursued with wider public consultation. There is no alternative but the ecologists together steering a campaign towards the democratization and achievement of this objective.