

Q&A with Hank Dittmar



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*Hank Dittmar is chief executive of the Prince’s Foundation for the Built Environment, the London-based educational charity established by the Prince of Wales to teach and demonstrate the principles of traditional architecture and urban design. Before taking that post in 2005, he was president and CEO of Reconnecting America, which seeks to develop communities around transit and walking, not automobiles. Dittmar is a board member of the Congress for the New Urbanism and is currently its chairman. He is the author of the 2003 book *The New Transit Town: Best Practices in Transit-Oriented Development*.*

Are green buildings a fad, or are they here to stay?

While there is a substantial amount of faddism to the green buildings movement, the need for greener buildings and greener neighborhoods is compelling and vital to the planet, and the movement will not go away.

Too much of green building is about technological fixes. At least here in the U.K., many “green” buildings are normal buildings with green gizmos tacked on. Little attention seems to be paid to the question of whether steel-and-glass-curtain-wall buildings can ever truly be sustainable no matter how many CHP [combined heat and power] plants or wind turbines are stuck on them.

While it is certainly a step in the right direction for Wal-Mart, for example, to “green” one of its stores by incorporating environmen-

tal features, the question is: if it is located by itself in a sea of parking on an arterial roadway not served by transit, and its customers all must drive from a 30- or 40-mile radius to shop there, is it truly green? It is the need to go *deeper* that has led the Congress for the New Urbanism, the U.S. Green Building Council, and the Natural Resources Defense Council [NRDC] to work together to create the LEED [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design] standard for neighborhood development [LEED-ND].

Do you see any roadblocks standing in the way of green buildings fully going mainstream, or are their economic and environmental benefits nearly an unstoppable force at this point?

The U.K. government has made a commitment to zero-carbon buildings by 2016 and has begun the process of revising building regulations to move toward that goal. As building codes are a state responsibility in the United States, it would be nice to see California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and northeastern governors like Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania take up the challenge of zero-carbon buildings as well. Even if they don’t, I think that the standards set here in the U.K. by the Building Research Establishment and in the U.S. by the U.S. Green Building Council are shifting the market. Greener urbanism will hopefully be driven by the LEED-ND standard and by government action to reflect the greenhouse gas impacts of driving.

Has the green building movement focused too much on individual buildings and overlooked the broader problems of automobile-dominated suburban development?

I have been working on climate issues actively since 1995 when President Clinton appointed me to the failed White House task force on the issue. The experts all said land use and transport strategies were too hard, and they argued for a mix of taxes, fuel economy standards, and technological fixes.

We are slowly making progress on this, but if you scratch a green builder, you will

find lots of enthusiasm for gadgets and very little for urbanism. Partly it is that people think that urbanism involves asking people to sacrifice by giving up their cars, shopping only in skanky food co-ops, and living without yards and with stairs too close to neighbors. We are not getting the story out about the many successful, vital, walkable, mixed-use communities being built by new urbanists and ULI members around the country.

In the long run, greener urbanism will succeed because it will improve the quality of people’s lives and save them money, and not primarily because it will save the environment or provide us with the tools for the long emergency. “Try it, you’ll like it” is better than “Do this even though it hurts because it’s good for the planet.”

You work for Prince Charles, who deeply believes in traditional architecture. How does that belief support the broader mandate of sustainability?

It is through the marriage of tradition and ecology that we link past, present, and future generations and demonstrate that far from being a fad, green urbanism is truly about taking the long view. We believe in tradition as a living thing, beginning with what has worked well in the past and evolving it to confront and respond to the problems of the present day.

As the Prince of Wales said in a recent speech to the British Home Builders Federation: “The drive for eco-excellence is, or should be, a key feature for new homebuilding. . . . I think it makes greater commercial sense to design an eco-excellent house of vernacular appearance that tells some local story.”

Doesn’t our formula-driven real estate industry stand in the way of green principles? What about building codes? Financing? Appraisals? Leasing practices?

Our current financial models are based on the idea of time value of money—an approach that deeply discounts future benefits and costs. This issue is magnified by the fact that real estate has been commoditized, particularly on the

commercial side, so that people are buying shares of portfolios rather than of estates [properties]. At the end of 2006, the Prince of Wales launched the Accounting for Sustainability project with a large group of corporate partners. The project seeks ways to integrate sustainability into both on- and off-balance-sheet corporate and government reporting.

Practices in the development industry will change as more information becomes available and as other industries begin to shift. Once the insurance industry responds and once the cost of transportation rises, then many aspects of our development paradigm will shift. Value capture strategies, long-term approaches to development, and town management are all growing aspects of industry practice.

We are looking closely at the way the most successful, beautiful, and dense parts of the U.K. were developed originally, and we are finding that most were developed on long-term leases by estates that developed urban design and architectural codes for the speculative builders. This model seemed to have worked very well for 200 years in promoting long-term value, encouraging maintenance, and supporting mixed use.

Are there any cities or nations that are leaders in sustainability?

We can learn from one another right across the board, but one of the first things we ought to learn is that the tools and techniques for creating sustainable communities may be cross-cultural, and the principles of walkable, mixed-use communities and legible beautiful places may be universal. Truly sustainable places are derived from a connection with local identity, building culture, climate, ecology, and materials, and from culture. We ought to be very suspicious of people who try to treat sustainability as a green brand to be exported just as we have exported the Western model of sprawl across the globe.

Do you have any favorite green buildings or sustainable communities, besides Poundbury?

Taos Pueblo comes to mind. It has been sus-

tained, largely by the sun, for 900 years.

Our own work at Upton outside of Northampton [60 miles (97 km) north of London], where the foundation did the charrette and initial master plan, is incorporating compact, mixed-income, and mixed-use traditional urbanism, sustainable urban drainage, and a high degree of green building.

The work that Leon Krier, Robert Adam Associates, and the Duchy of Cornwall are doing at Newquay in Cornwall, and the project that we are doing with Paul Murrain and the developer Red Tree at Sherford outside of Plymouth promise to take sustainability to the next level.

The NRDC building in Santa Monica by Moule Polyzoides is not only beautiful, but also a benchmark in green building, as are the firm's transit-oriented development projects in Pasadena and South Pasadena. Fregonese Calthorpe's plans for Austin, Salt Lake City, and southern California, and their emerging work in Louisiana demonstrate that to be truly sustainable, we have to confront economies, transport systems, and land use at the metropolitan scale.

How does sustainability—in its broadest sense—fit into the Prince's Trust mandate?

The Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment is one of 17 charities for which the Prince of Wales is president. He founded 15 of them personally. Taken together, they represent an interconnected approach to sustainability across all of its dimensions: youth and elder opportunity, education and skills, corporate social responsibility, the built and natural environment, arts and crafts, and health. The charities work both in the U.K. and internationally. The Prince's Trust is one of our sister charities, and it is the largest of the Prince's Charities.

Are today's young people the ones who will transform sustainability from an ideal into an accepted everyday practice?

Sometimes I feel like I will spend my life undoing the mistakes of my generation and the generation or two before me. We have had an enormous amount of work to do just fixing all of the things that were trashed in the

middle of the last century.

The kids coming up today will be unencumbered by the residue of the modern project, and they will be working in a world of fairly clear limits. But they will not find those limits confining. They will work within them to create places that are truly worth living in because they reflect the materiality and the presence of local cultures, environments, and economies, while tapping into a truly global storehouse of knowledge and tools.

How will it affect our built environment—in the U.K., the United States, and around the world?

We'd better start getting it right in the United States, Great Britain, and all of Europe as we can't really expect other countries to do better unless we set an example. By nature, I am rationally skeptical and constitutionally optimistic, and so I know that creating livable, walkable resource-efficient places will be a long, hard slog. But I wake up every day excited by the progress we are making both in the U.K. and the U.S., and abroad.

A more sustainable built environment to me means that we ought to be able to tell where we are—city, suburb, countryside, or India, Mexico, or Indiana—at a glance because it is clear that the buildings and the form of neighborhoods have evolved in response to climate, ecology, and culture. To do this, we will have solve what Andrés Duany calls the problem of large numbers, creating flexible tools for development that can respond to differences on the ground. Such tools as design codes, pattern books, and community engagement are all key here. It is an exciting and worthwhile challenge, and an area where I hope ULI can continue to lead. **U**

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