

# SUSTAINABILITY— BEYOND SLOGANS

China is in the final stage of building its first eco cities—Dongtan and Wanzhuang. The goal is to have the cities produce their own energy from wind, solar power, biofuels and recycled city waste. Bike and foot paths will reduce the reliance on cars and the cities will contain small farms for local organically grown food.

The lead designer for the cities is Peter Head, a Director of the global planning firm, Arup, based in London. He dismisses the term “sustainable development” calling it “simply an expression of the desire to increase human development...within the environmental limits of the planet.” Instead, he believes modern urban planning should have very careful and measurable targets for social, economic and environmental outcomes. Calling sustainability a “confusing concept”, he supports a greater emphasis on long range quantifiable targets.

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In the case of the Chinese eco cities, the planning targets have a 30 year horizon with the objective of making sure that the cities will function economically “with good prosperity in 20 or 30 years time”. Planning for the cities incorporates researched projections for shortages in water, energy and materials three decades hence.

Part of the approach involves something called “cultural planning.” When starting a community planning project, the firm engages in a research study on the history of the community. In the case of Wanzhuang, they found that the local people had a history of dancing squares and other small cultural facilities in their communities. This concept has been included in the larger cities under development.

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Asked about the sustainability issues facing major cities like Paris and New York, Peter Head avoids the short term jingoism that often turns urban sustainability into little more than an election platform. Instead he explains that “the problems of energy supply and energy use and security of that supply and the cost of it are the issues that make cities unsustainable at the moment.” He adds that in large cities the increasing gap between the rich and the poor is a major part of unstable living environments. This leads him to place economic development as the centre post of sustainable development.