With a Whole Heart:
Nurturing an Ethic of Caring for Nature
in the Education
of Australian Planners

VOLUME ONE:
NINE CHAPTERS

by

Wendy Sarkissian, B.Sc., M.A., M.T.P.
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work which has not been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

Wendy Sarkissian
13 September 1996
ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary dissertation addresses one aspect of the education of Australian urban planners: *an ethic of caring for Nature*, conceived as a deeply grounded, contextual, ethic based on a sense of connection with the natural world. It articulates what an ethic of caring entails, explores the current state of and potential for the teaching of environmental ethics within Australian planning schools, examines from an ethical standpoint the educational implications of direct connection with Nature, and proposes the foundations for a radical curriculum for planning education to nurture an ethic of caring for Nature. Three pivotal assumptions underpin this research: that Australian urban development is contributing to both local and global ecological crises; that the activities of urban planners help to determine the form and style of urban development and, by implication, the ecological impacts; and that the education of urban planners influences their practice. I argue that a complete revisioning of Australian urban planning education is necessary to counter the entrenched anthropocentrism and utilitarianism which underpin both planning practice and education.

The dissertation sets out to address three questions: *What is the current situation in Australian planning schools with respect to the relationship between planning education in general and education in environmental ethics, in particular?*; *How might the education of urban planners in Australia be changed to contribute to the solution of ecological problems?*; and *How important to the educator and the student who ultimately becomes the practitioner is a direct experience of Nature in giving substance and energy to the formation of environmental ethics?*
The study employs two primary research approaches or paths, the *path of explanation* and the *path of expression*, the first with a quantitative emphasis, and the second being primarily qualitative research; both are within the interpretive research paradigm. It addresses the educational origins of what appears to be planners' continued unquestioning participation in Australian urban development and their resistance to embracing more realistic formulations of a relationship with Nature. It offers the first articulation of a learning model upon which an undergraduate or postgraduate curriculum could be based.

The dissertation begins by asking, via an exploration of secondary sources in feminist epistemology and ethics, what an ethic of caring could involve. The current situation with respect to environmental ethics education in Australian schools of planning is then thoroughly examined, yielding the tentative conclusion that virtually nothing is happening, that there is little to build on. Asking what could be the potential for direct experience of Nature to nourish an ethic of caring, the next section chronicles my personal experience of a year spent consciously attempting to do this: a journey to my ecological self. The last sections of the dissertation summarise the lessons learned from all aspects of the investigation, particularly the direct experience of Nature. Following examination of problems inherent in emancipatory and technocratic liberal educational philosophies, I propose the elements of a radical curriculum for planning education to nurture an ethic of caring for Nature. In the learning model which emerges, the *T.E.N.C.E.L.* model, I argue for a curriculum which contains components of the following elements: *teamwork*; direct *experience of Nature*; grounding in *community* processes and experiences; the formal study of *ethics*, by means of environmental ethics courses; and attention to the aspects of professional *literacy* necessary to understand environmental issues related to planning practice.

The dissertation also includes, as an appendix, a videotape, “Beginning Again with Nature: Environmental Ethics,” designed to communicate those qualities of my journey to the ecological self which are better expressed in sound and images.
for Karl

guided by the Moon
enraptured by stars

for my Mother

and for

the bandicoots
the White Gum
the wallabies
the curlews
the creek
and
Tristia
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many blessings attended this research project. As the student became ready, the teachers appeared.

Six supervisors helped at various stages of the Ph.D. process. At the University of Adelaide's Mawson Centre for Environmental Studies, Dr. Sandra Taylor helped me begin my research and refine early versions of my research proposal in 1992. At Murdoch University, during 1993, Dr. Elizabeth Harman co-supervised my research. I am very grateful for their assistance.

The major task of supervision has been shared by Professor Peter Newman and Dr. Patsy Hallen of the Institute for Science and Technology Policy (ISTP), Murdoch University. I bow in gratitude to and acknowledgment of their many hours' work, gentle direction, sensitive tutoring and skilled advice. Both have modelled an ethic of caring in the deepest sense and guided me away from many foolish errors. Peter and Patsy have respected my need to proceed in my own way, to speak with my own voice. They have ensouled this process for me and with me. I honour the green heart in each of them.

During 1992, my field research was guided by Professor David Lea, Director of the North Australia Research Unit (NARU), Australian National University, Darwin. David's help included the logistical support required by my 'Deep Creek' bush circumstances. His commitment to sustainable development and reform within the Australian planning profession encouraged me during difficult times. David made available NARU's excellent research support services, as well as providing astute professional guidance and warm friendship when I dearly needed it.

In the School of Architecture at the University of British Columbia, in 1995-96, Shelagh Lindsey, philosopher and sociologist, undertook to be my "overseas supervisor", supporting this research with countless acts of love, scholarship and encouragement; reading and providing detailed comments on drafts of several chapters. Oh, thank you, Shelagh!

To Mica, who graciously agreed to my suggestion to build a house and live for a year on his Deep Creek property, I offer gratitude for his generosity and respect for his privacy. Here is my book on ecology, Mica.
This research was funded by an Australian Postgraduate Research Award, the Dorothy Davidson Fellowship from the Australian Federation of University Women (AFUW), Queensland Branch, and a postgraduate student travel grant from Murdoch University. I thank all these bodies, especially the gracious women of AFUW in Brisbane.

As I was about to commence this research, a colleague who was completing her Ph.D. advised me that I would have to forego my collaborative ways to ensure that nobody stole my ideas. I completely ignored her advice. How glad I am for that! Throughout this dissertation are woven strands of information, insight, wisdom and encouragement from scores of friends and colleagues who have read this work in progress or contributed in other ways. I acknowledge with deepest thanks all those people in Appendix A.

I wish to acknowledge individually some to whom I am especially grateful: the Heads of planning schools, educators, students, members of the planning community and others who participated in my surveys and made themselves available for interviews; the professional, and administrative staff of NARU, especially Colleen Pyne and Sally Roberts Bailey of the incomparably cool NARU Library; the adults and children of the “Deep Creek” community; and:

Juergen Schmidt, Ann Cross, Susan Ball, Evelyn Martin, Leonie Sandercok, Ann Forsyth, Clare Marcus, Bob Zehner, Jean Hillier, Aidan Davison, Joc Schmiechen, Paul Josif, Henry Koops, Jenny Longley, Susan Davidson, Roselina Stone; Jan Kapetas, Vanda Rounsefell, Karen Assumption, Bonnie Schoenberger, Bill Rees, Rae Fry, Mary Miles, Linda and Wolfgang Wirf, Amanda Rutherford, Carol Bacci, Barbara Boden, Kelvin Walsh, Kristin Stewart, Ann Puttner, Brian Richards, Andrea Cook, Linda Butcher, Chamlong Poboon, and Che Poboon.

The five jewels of my Adelaide-based Accountability Group have brightened this process with their love, encouragement, practical assistance, professional wisdom and good humour. I honour the memory of the late, great, Malcolm Challen and extend warmest thanks to Shelagh Noble, Janet Gould, Angela Hazebroek and Iris Iwanicki.

Now, to my husband and soul partner, Karl Langheinrich. His unconditional loving support, embodying at the cellular level an ethic of caring, has nourished and uplifted my spirits. His great cooking, fine humour, patient proofreading and tough fearlessness have made the last three years of this process glorious—even during tough times. Loving Nature, he teaches me how. Thank you, beloved.

And finally, I kneel to the Earth, and give thanks to the Forest, the Creek, the Goddess, Trisitia and the spirit of the White Gum. Namaste.
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PROLOGUE

Anzac Day, 1995. Already the air is crisp with the hint of winter, though it’s only April. Enjoying their last warm-weather public holiday, the good people of Melbourne are spending the afternoon at the beach. Here at Williamstown, 20 minutes from the centre of Melbourne, they are combining two national pastimes: a walk on the beach and a look at a new housing estate. Like us, a lot of people are driving around.

After a long day of planning assessment, we’re two planners on a busman’s holiday. We pull up beside the old Rifle Club headquarters, sparkling with fresh yellow paint. I hardly recognise the restored building which used to house the rifle shooters. A sign proclaims its future as retail and professional offices. A nankeen kestrel abandons a spot on the fence post as I pace out on the asphalt parking lot where the public participation workshop tent had been. I conjure up the meeting six years ago. Five hundred concerned local people. I remember how it was then. And contrast it with the way it is today.

Returning to the car, we make a circuit of narrow streets lined with small, cute cottages, reproduction terrace houses, newly planted flower beds. Picket fences glow heritage green, burgundy paint glistening on mailboxes with shiny brass numbers. Even though it’s a public holiday, some builders are working -- calling to each other in Italian and Slavic languages above the whine of saws. Some families are moving in. I sense excitement, the expectation of new beginnings. A new neighbourhood is emerging. Given its history, it’s called, predictably, “The Range”.

We park near a sign which promises medium-density housing and head west to Waders Beach. The wind is sharp on our faces. Picking our way through builders’ rubble along the muddy footpath, we recall our work together here, six years ago. “Almost to the day,” I announce. “We did our first letter-boxing on Anzac Day. Do you remember? Thirteen thousand households!”

“How could I ever forget? I was only twenty-one. It was my first public meeting,” my young colleague smiles, unlocking the gate to the recreation zone which buffers the sensitive conservation zone from human activities.

He reminds me of our children’s consultation workshop. How the local children loved the orange-bellied parrots that made the Rifle Range their home!

We have a booklet for new residents to guide us. It tells us that this coastline has been virtually untouched by European settlement. An Aboriginal midden, a mound of shells from an ancient camp, was found near the beach. Along the gravel path, we find a bench beside one of the lakes, and turn to admire three more under construction. We marvel at thousands of native plants, including tussock grasses and three species of saltbush, carefully planted in a deep straw mulch by young unemployed people as part of a local employment project sponsored by the developer and operated by the Friends of the Williamstown Wetlands. The bushes, some of 360,000 native grasses, shrubs and trees to be planted in the first two years, are selected to withstand salt spray. They meet the reeds planted around the artificial lake. It serves to filter and restrict upstream pollutants from entering the Bay. The seed stock for the native plants was collected by a group of local volunteers on the site before work began. Only if you look carefully can you see that they have been planted. In a few months, they will be indistinguishable from the surrounding
saltbush and shrubs. We smile, imagining the future. This is artful work, we decide. Restoration. Repair. It's careful and caring.

The light is fading in the west, burnishing pale bodies of white-faced herons and spoonbills resting and wading by the tall reeds in the wetlands. At the water’s edge, an ancient plant community of lichen and Austral seabottle, like velvet, splashes colour on the black basalt outcrops—a brilliant quilt of rust, gold, emerald, black. A cormorant rests on warm rocks, soaking up the last of the autumn sunlight. Above a whimbrel is joined by two green shanks, representatives of 120 species of migratory birds whose annual journeys draw them down from breeding grounds in Siberia and northern Eurasia. Our beach is located on an international flyway for migratory birds, we read in the booklet.

My colleague Kelvin has brought our new book, *Community Participation in Practice*, a collection of cases about our participatory planning work. He turns to the chapter about Williamstown; the battle, the triumph. Our project a half a dozen years ago. While the details are familiar, it's instructive to remind ourselves that we are sitting in the outcome of one of Melbourne’s ugliest environmental conflicts. I read our words, adding a comment or two. Kelvin bends to listen above the bird calls, the crashing waves.

The 111.3 hectare site (purchased by the Urban Land Authority from the Federal Government in June 1987 for $11.7 million) was ideally suited for residential development. For 108 years it was a rifle range, close to the city centre and in an area of high demand for housing. It had some singular natural features, including panoramic views across Port Philip Bay. With approximately 3.5 kilometres of virtually undisturbed natural coastline, it was one of the few undeveloped waterfront sites in Melbourne suitable for residential development.

The original feasibility study, prepared in 1986, was spurred on by the need to utilise "surplus government land", to create housing opportunities in central areas and thus counter Melbourne's urban sprawl, to utilise local social and physical infrastructure and to maximise lot yield and return to the developer, who had paid top dollar for the site. Land for housing was to be maximised to keep housing costs down. Acknowledging "the range of features of cultural and natural significance," including roosting and feeding areas for migratory birds, the study found "no serious impediments to residential development."

The 1987 proposal, described in the local press as "a glamorous design," envisaged a 450-boat marina, 10,000 square metres of office space, and high-density and other canal-front housing. It boasted a 'normal' residential subdivision; a water-based subdivision; a marina and associated facilities; a commercial/tourist complex based on a marine theme; coastal public open space; and two coastal conservation reserves. The original plans provided for a 100 metre coastal buffer area, with a 500 metre distance between boating activities and roosting sites.

Significantly, the feasibility study failed to take account of the fact (although the planners reported it) that approximately half of the Williamstown community submissions favoured public open space with no housing! Many people considered this ambitious plan inappropriate—some 2000 objections were received. Almost all the concerns were environmental,
with petitioners arguing that the proposal endangered the fragile marine ecology. In particular, concerns focused on groups of inter-tidal wading birds which used the mudflats as their primary feeding ground, and stands of white mangrove trees, regarded as essential elements in the local ecosystem and necessary for preservation of biodiversity on a wider scale. The shy waders require more than six hours feeding in every tidal cycle. Experts argued that disturbances which impaired their feeding efficiency could diminish their populations. They said the canal system would turn environmentally sensitive mudflats into an island. Blasting of shallow basalt rock, truck movements, and continual dredging of the boat entry would have disastrous consequences for the local marine life.

After the State Government failed to deliver on the community’s initial expectations, the Friends of the Rifle Range were galvanised into action. They used their considerable political influence to discredit the plan and the high-profile planning and design consultants, and forced a complete reassessment of the proposal. For these and other reasons, the project was ultimately stopped at State Cabinet level (the Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands, also the Deputy Premier and later to become the Premier, was the local Member of Parliament).

While the original project was still alive, I was engaged with a colleague by the Urban Land Authority (Victoria) to evaluate the proposal in light of the large number of objections. By the time we had completed our assessment, the original project was in serious difficulty. By the time we were re-engaged by the Authority in 1989 to conduct the community workshop, the Friends of the Rifle Range had succeeded in stopping the project. (Another factor was legal advice received by the Government that without the marina the high-density housing component was not seen as appropriate.) The Friends also succeeded in achieving wide acceptance of the site’s ecological values. Under the new collaborative arrangements, a consultative committee was established in February 1989, and concept plans were finalised in May, in consultation with the Friends and other government agencies. The Friends continued to have wide-ranging support within the Williamstown community and within the State Government. They were respected and admired for their ecological literacy, their clear objectives, their unwavering commitment to protecting the conservation values of the site, and the broad base of support they had built over many years of activism.

Our work involved collaborative planning processes with the Friends and the wider Williamstown community. As a result, the high level of initial objection was dramatically reversed. Whereas there were 2000 objections to the original 1987 proposal, the revised proposal, exhibited in 1989, brought 1200 letters of support. The collaborative process and a participatory design workshop, held on site, for 500, contributed to building trust and producing a more appropriate plan. By October 1989, the plan had been approved. Nevertheless, addressing the concerns of the three remaining objectors through formal appeals (heard in June 1990) still cost the Authority about $1 million.

Construction started in September 1990, with the first lots released for sale in May 1991. Eventually there will be about 940 dwellings, housing a population of about 2500. Houses are designed and sited according to
passive solar design principles. The revised plan, for housing, conservation and recreation uses, represented a dramatic departure. In June 1990, the Melbourne Age newspaper described it as of “vastly different character from the first,” praising its “modesty and environmental emphasis.” There were no canals or seafront housing, although many houses had water views and a few had access to Port Philip Bay. Most streets formed the familiar pattern of Williamstown’s grid.

Some key features of the revised plan were creation of a narrow salt lake stretching 1.5 kilometres between the houses and the sea, and thus acting as a buffer for the sensitive foreshore; protection of bird life, safeguarding the habitat from being overrun and thus destroyed by human intrusion (walkers confined to a boardwalk to limit damage; a hide for bird-watching located about 20 metres from the bird-feeding area—a 16-hectare area where birds wade to feed between tides); and efforts to replicate the character of “old Williamstown” in allotment size, price range, overall housing density and materials, with a range of small, medium and large lots for detached dwellings, as well as terrace housing.

The handling of two open drains notorious for their industrial pollution reflected the changed approach. Water pollution from adjacent sites is managed in an ecologically sensitive manner by means of drainage ponds and filters which actually improved water quality.

By most accounts, the development of “The Range” is seen as a success. When land was first released for sale in 1991, the response was overwhelming and sales have continued strongly. A recent pre-purchase seminar held on site drew a crowd of over one hundred. The Range development has reflected the character of Williamstown, guaranteed by guidelines and controls over building materials, house siting and colour selection. Reflecting a commitment to ecological sustainability, densities parallel those of the surrounding area. Building lots range from 270 to 800 square metre; the street pattern reflects that of old Williamstown; about 60 percent of all residential land is devoted to house blocks, with the remainder for medium-density development, including townhouses, older persons accommodation and some apartments.

The lake, a major feature of the site, also forms part of an integrated system for filtering and treating run-off prior to discharge into the Bay. Guidelines aimed at protecting the new reserve from excessive site erosion, water runoff and litter were produced for builders and residents. The developer is contributing technical expertise and $3.5 million to develop the 50 hectares of coastal wetland into a wildlife sanctuary. The rehabilitation and conservation, undertaken by the Authority largely at its own expense, include an ecologically sustainable fresh-water lake and wetlands zone, boardwalks, viewing areas, a bird hide, educational centre and recreation spots. The Friends of the Williamstown Wetlands, still participate in the development of the site and are frequent visitors to the wetlands reserve.

I finish reading. It’s getting late and already a cold wind is freshening across the salt marshes. We agree we’re relieved that the Friends saved the coastline. We’re proud to have been part of it. We’re glad that the new housing is on smaller lots, more financially accessible to ordinary people, and that it is buffered from the birds’ feeding areas. Pressure from the community, the unions and local politicians forced
the Authority to hire a totally new consultant team. These planners prepared an 
ecologically sensitive plan and have maintained their commitment to those principles. 
But we know it’s possible to do better—both ecologically and in terms of continuing 
community involvement. The delay cost the Authority millions in fees, interest, and 
legal costs. The implementation, the Friends tell us, is still far from perfect. The loss 
of trust within the Williamstown community endures; its effects can’t be measured.

We head back to the car, shivering. We stomp around the car, knocking mud off our 
boots, exclaiming. How could those planners who worked on the original plan ever 
have proposed such a plan? Some critics saw it as the wholesale destruction of the 
environmental values of the site. The lives of the birds, the mangroves... We shudder 
at how close it was, how it could have been. It would have been a disaster in other 
ways, too. We know from the Authority, that had the original project proceeded, the 
capital expenditure could not have been recovered during the recession of 1990-1992.

Some of our most distinguished colleagues worked on the first proposal, 
enthusiastically supporting the concept in their professional reports. Our colleagues. 
The Australian planning profession. Heading home, we shake our heads, wondering. 
What were their alternatives? Did they really have any choice? Have they ever taken 
a stand or are they simply the developers’ accomplices? Unless the community forces 
them to act otherwise...

We ask ourselves, did they feel inferior to or intimidated by the developers and their 
financial backers? Did they believe that if they decided to gainsay the developers on 
environmental issues, the developers would refuse them the contract and search until 
they found compliant planners? Or were the developers ahead of the planners and did 
the planners scare them away from environmental protection issues? Did those 
planners not keep up with changes and developments through reading professional 
literature or via continuing professional education? Were they not made aware of 
these issues during their university education?

What values did those original planners hold dear? How did they come to hold the 
values encoded in the first, discredited plan? What did they care for? We ask 
ourselves, “Did they not care for Nature? Were they never given opportunities to 
learn to consider an ethic of caring for Nature as part of their professional 
approach?”

And, we ask, how can the values so bitterly fought for and now embodied in the final 
plan for "The Range" be nurtured in other planners? How can we learn, as a 
profession, an ethic of caring for Nature?
We pray for the fragile ecology of the heart and mind. The sense of meaning. So finely assembled and balanced and so easily overturned. The careful, ongoing construction of love. As painful and exhausting as the struggle for truth and as easily abandoned.

Hard fought and won are the shifting sands of this sacred ground, this ecology. Easy to desecrate and difficult to defend, this vulnerable joy, this exposed faith, this precious order. This sanity.

We shall be careful. With others and with ourselves.

Amen.