The Emergence of Sustainability Culture and the Sustainability Practitioner

Matthew Roy Charles PARNELL

Bachelor of Building (B.Build.) - University of New South Wales

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Matthew Roy Charles PARNELL

Abstract

In this thesis, I propose that sustainability is a new emergent cultural phenomenon – a new "dreaming" - arising from our conscious and unconscious actions, our relationships and our connection to place. Such a culture of sustainability is essential to support the vision of a sustainable global society. I further propose that the way sustainability is practised, both personally and professionally, has significant potential for fostering the emergence of sustainability culture, and that a mature sustainability culture, in turn, will support our myriad actions towards sustainability. The above propositions have a significant caveat: emergence, as understood in complexity theory, is not predictable. The current unsustainable paradigm of global development is also an emergent phenomenon. Real sustainability is therefore not inevitable, simply because a vision has been articulated, and strategies and actions implemented.

I also contend that as sustainability is holistic in conception, it requires a holistic approach to practice, in addition to the mechanistic prescriptions common to much contemporary sustainability practice. To move towards a holistic approach to practice requires a different type of practitioner from the conventional practitioner: more generalist than specialist, drawing on their "inner sustainability culture" when faced with complex sustainability problems, capable of working across scales, open to discovery of new patterns, and mindful of the degree of complexity in any practice setting.

In recognition of the need for a new cultural paradigm of sustainability, and drawing on the concept of emergence as described by complexity theory, I have designed this research project to investigate the following four themes:

1. Culture as an emergent quality of complex adaptive socio-technical systems;
2. The connections between human action and emergent system qualities;
3. The prospects for the emergence of a culture of sustainability; and
4. The implications of emergent sustainability culture for the sustainability practitioner.

In this thesis, I argue that we need a model of sustainability culture that accommodates the emergence phenomenon and new ways of emergence-based sustainability practice. I therefore propose an Emergence Model of Sustainability

Culture to illustrate the relationship between sustainability, culture and the emergence phenomenon, and I articulate four Emergence Patterns for Sustainability Practice as a working framework for emergence-oriented sustainability practice across different generic practice settings in simple, complicated, complex and chaotic space. I hope that sustainability practitioners will find my Emergence Model and Emergence Patterns to be helpful in progressing to a more considered and deeper approach to sustainability practice than contemporary approaches, especially where sustainability problems are complex and difficult. In this way we may continue to develop a culture of sustainability as a new “dreaming” and the practice of sustainability will progress further to service humanity’s compelling need.

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List of Abbreviations

ARIES: The Australian Research Institute in Education and Sustainability

ATSIC: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission

ATWORK: Aboriginal Technical Worker Program

CAT: Centre For Appropriate Technology

CCP: Cities for Climate Protection

CHCC: Coffs Harbour City Council

CDEP: Community Development Employment Program

CoP: Community of Practice

CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility

DCDSCA: Department of Community Development, Sport and Cultural Affairs, Northern Territory Government

DK-CRC: Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre

DOP: Department of Planning, New South Wales Government

EATING: Education, Action, Trust, Inclusion, Nourishment and Governance

EE: Environmental Education

EfS: Education for Sustainability

FHBH: Fixing Houses for Better Health

GECA: Good Environmental Choice Australia

GRI: Global Reporting Initiative

IAP2: International Association for Public Participation

ICLEI: International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives

IHANT: Indigenous Housing Authority of the Northern Territory

IISD: International Institute for Sustainable Development

ISSP: International Society of Sustainability Practitioners

LCA: Life Cycle Assessment

MAC: Mt Arthur Centre

MIPS: Material Intensity Per Units of Service

NABERS: National Built Environment Rating Scheme

NAHS: National Aboriginal Health Strategy

NSW: New South Wales

NTRC: National Technology Resource Centre

OLC: Our Living City Settlement Planning Process at CHCC

OR: Organizational Review at CHCC

ORT: Organizational Review Team at CHCC

PLA: Participation-Learning-Action

PME: Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation

PRA: Participation-Reflection-Action

QBL: Quadruple Bottom Line

RRA: Rapid Rural Appraisal

RTA: Roads and Traffic Authority, New South Wales Government

SCU: Southern Cross University

SA: Sustainability Assessment

SoE: State of the Environment

SRA: Sustainability Reporting Alliance

TBL: Triple Bottom Line

TNS: The Natural Step

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

UNEP: United Nations Environment Programme

UTA: University of Tasmania, School of Architecture

WASIP: Waste and Sustainability Implementation Program

WSUD: Water Sustainable Urban Design

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