

Organismic Thinking in Housing Developments

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Quite a few years' research in the area of the eco-housing development concept have led to the identification of an interesting approach to integrating the interests of business, community and environment. This approach is called 'Organismics'. We believe that entire housing communities can be created based on 'Organismic thinking', villages in which investor-residents frequently need not leave their communities to make a living, create an investment portfolio or participate in a wide variety of thriving, interdependent businesses.

The idea of this brief outline is that a company which creates and retains ownership of the non-housing infrastructure (walled garden, glasshouses, conference centre, offices etc) in such a development can achieve many distinct advantages, among them:

1. The developments are considerably more socially and environmentally friendly than the government currently envisages
2. The amount of travel to and from the completed developments is considerably reduced – in addition to those reductions created by rail facilities
3. Benefits to residents and to surrounding communities outweigh those of all other developments currently being built or planned
4. Many local objections, therefore, from residents, planners and others are removed at source, or considerably reduced
5. From social housing to high-end, all property is at premium prices in each class
6. Customers are far more incentivised to buy homes – they can buy a residential and professional

lifestyle beyond the gym-and-swimming pool that is currently best-in-class, yet without paying above standard residential prices for simple, home-only packages

7. There is no additional net cost to the developer for these additional facilities
8. In fact, the non-housing infrastructure builds a significant and growing asset value for its owners
9. The non-housing infrastructure also creates important revenue streams for its owners
10. Social housing becomes more affordable both to purchasers and to developers
11. The homes sell themselves in a viral fashion, whereby the sales created in one development automatically trigger further sales in other such schemes
12. Residents are powerfully incentivised to purchase additional properties, given assured incomes streams from them, as pensions and other investments

It works like this: each development has at its heart a walled or market garden and a 'village hall' which is also a business centre with office and workshop spaces and conferencing facilities. This creates the setting for an Organismic web of businesses which, like the organs in any healthy organism, feed, and are fed by, each other.

The following is an example of just one possible loop – one of many possible loops, by means of which this can happen. Imagine the scene:

A research and publishing company, owned and operated by a homeowner in the village sells an article on Organismic thinking to, say, *The Observer*. For this it is paid by the newspaper. A reader, having enjoyed and been fascinated by the article, wants to find out more. She buys the book on the subject - another sale to the research and publishing company in the village. Having read the final page, our reader decides this is gripping stuff and she must attend one of the residential courses on

Organismic thinking described there. She goes to www.organismics.org and discovers that these courses are run at the conference centres at some of the villages listed on the website. She books herself a place.

Some months later our heroine attends her course. In doing so she provides revenue for numerous businesses within the selected village, including the conference centre, the consultancy which designed and delivered her course, the bookshop, the delicatessen, the restaurant and, of course, the market garden which supplied these last two enterprises. In addition, she stayed at one of the few non-owner-occupied properties in the village, thereby generating income for the owners, who have invested in the second property as pension earners, along with the oak and walnut plantations outside the village, from whose harvest tomorrow's structures will be built.

These plantations, along with the market garden and a good number of other businesses in and around the village, are staffed, in part, by people who live in the lower-cost housing dotted about the community, some of it tied to the land. Many of these people, particularly the young adults, had hitherto been excluded from living in the area where they were born, as prices soared when housing developers built dormitory developments for cash-rich commuters who were drifting out of the main cities to enjoy the 'good life' on the weekends. Now these first-time buyers from within the area are able to participate in government-funded apprenticeship schemes whereby they part-pay for their homes by offering their new-found skills to the contractors. Of course, they can also find employment among the business-owners increasingly drawn to purchase their own homes and operate their companies from within the development.

Back to our visiting heroine: as you might expect, the residential course exceeded her expectations,

high though they were, and she returned home bubbling over with excitement. Next she proposes that her entire family must join her for a couple of weeks at one of the villages on one of the eco-tourism holidays she has seen advertised, her husband and children are a little overwhelmed but give their consent in the face of her enthusiasm. So it was agreed. And who could object anyway, when our shero generously offered to pay for the entire trip with her nest-egg of recent lottery winnings?

A few months later, the entire family arrives at a remarkably peaceful yet paradoxically very lively village in the Andalucian mountains. The family had taken a while to agree but had finally settled upon this village for their holiday. (There were, by now, quite a number of them in various parts of the world, many in the wealthy northern hemisphere twinned in trade agreements with partner villages in non-industrialised countries.)

The holiday passed faster than anyone could believe. There was so much fun to be had. Not only did Mum and Dad get plenty of opportunity to enjoy the village restaurant and bars while the children were uproariously entertained at a whole succession of events organised mostly by the teenage residents to supplement their allowances. They also enjoyed, to their delight and amazement, learning about the propagation and preparation of traditional local varieties of fruits and vegetables. Not that they had to restrict themselves only to these: the extensive glasshouses, heated by compost, provided a vast range of year-round exotic fruits and flowers, more reminiscent of a tropical destination. Not only that, the workshops alongside, heated during the cold mountain evenings by the same compost system, gave them the (hilarious) opportunity to try out their culinary skills making preserves, patés, pickles, pasties, pies, purées and lots of other more unusual value-added delicatessen products probably beginning with 'p'.

They and the children also joined in with many of the workshops run by the village pottery and forge, the sculptors, the painters, the farriers, the goldsmiths, the lithographers, the poets and the brewers. What with the impromptu singsongs and recitals at the bars, the concerts and theatre at the village hall and the barn dance on Saturday night, they hardly had time to take in the splendour of the surrounding landscape.

And so, finally, our weary revellers began to pack their many newfound treasures and memories into their groaning suitcases. As the Eurostar whisked the family homewards, there was a rather solemn silence among them. Until Dad perked up suddenly and said “Wouldn’t it be great if we lived there the whole time?” The children looked at each other in astonishment. “I didn’t see a mind-reading course advertised,” replied Mum, smiling. “But how would we live,” said Dad, his expression losing its momentary brightness. “You’d have to give up your research post and the magazine would never put up with me working so far from the office.”

“Well,” replied Mum, “it all started with this very well-researched article I read in *The Observer*, written by a journalist not unlike you. Isn’t it time you, like all the day-traders, designers, architects and market gardeners, started following your dream and working from home?”

Robert Barnard-Weston BA MSc FRSA

Robert Weston is responsible for Organismics. He also co-founded the UK farmers’ markets movement, the first eco-hotel in Bath, England (www.ecobloomfield.com) and a kitchen design and construction company working in reclaimed materials (www.thenewreclaimers.com). He holds a

bachelor's degree in Philosophy from the University of Southampton and a master's degree in Responsibility and Business Practice from the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath's School of Management. His master's degree research focused on sustainability and the food industry.

Robert is an affiliated facilitator of the Professional Practice for Sustainable Development (PP4SD) programme, created through the Institute of Environmental Sciences, with the participation of fourteen professional bodies including the RIBA, RICS and ICE.

He spent the first ten years of his career in corporate marketing and communications. He then finally noticed in the late 1980s that his pro bono work and professional endeavours were directly at odds with each other – so he merged them in a sort of Hegelian synthesis.

He has since been a consultant in the strategy, communication, facilitation and activation of sustainability disciplines, working with a wide range of clients over twenty years, including Tarmac Group, Carillion, Microsoft, Bechtel, NatWest Bank, Barclays Bank, Ford, Allied Domecq, Scottish Power, Toyota, the OECD Development Assistance Committee, DFID, DETR, DTI, the Government of Uganda, the Soil Association, Survival International, WWF and Sustrans, the creators of the UK's National Cycle Network.

Robert has published three books on environmental and social equity matters, two of them commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply and dealing with Corporate Social Responsibility issues – particularly child labour – in global supply chains; the third, inevitably, is called 'Organismics – a Present for the Future.' He is working on 'Organismics 2.0.'