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Lessons on sustainability from our Nordic neighbours

April 13, 2011 Steve Maxwell

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- **Pekka Sauri, deputy mayor of Helsinki**

Just over in Europe, you’ll find a group of modern, northern people thriving in a challenging landscape very similar to our own.

They have relatively small populations, they deal with harsh winters, and they rely on wisdom and good planning to survive and thrive in an environment with limited natural resources. What I learned about how these people meet the challenges of living sustainably and elegantly in the frozen north fills me with both joy and at least a little despair. Joy that some people have achieved goals that I didn’t think were possible, and despair because of a question: Why haven’t we Canadians managed to achieve anything close to the same levels of beauty and sustainability?

My mixed emotions sprang from the CanNORD 2011 conference last month, where I was a delegate. Leaders in urban design and sustainability from five Nordic countries — Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Iceland — gathered with their Canadian counterparts at the Allstream Centre at Toronto’s Exhibition Place to share ideas and experiences about building better cities.

In this case “better” means boosting the efficiency of energy use, reducing our burden on the environment and creating city landscapes that are beautiful, emotionally uplifting and ecologically sustainable. It’s not that we Canadians haven’t made some progress in these areas, it’s just that I now know how much this progress falls short of what’s happening elsewhere. Take Helsinki, the capital of Finland, for example.

Helsinki’s Heating

More than 90 per cent of all buildings in this city of almost 600,000 are connected to district heating plants. This is one of the highest rates of district heating in the world, and it’s also the most efficient and least expensive option possible for space heating. Insulated, underground pipes connect buildings, both large and small, to efficient central heating and cooling plants that condition indoor air at much lower financial and environmental cost than individual furnaces. Toronto only has district services like this in part of the downtown core.

Helsinki’s civic leaders are also committed to the lofty and necessary goal of completely eliminating all fossil fuel consumption for power generation. This isn’t even on our radar screen here in Canada, and part of the way the Finns are making this happen is by recapturing heat wherever it is given off by other processes. Heat is

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even extracted from purified municipal sewage and large computer halls, for example, and used again for space heating.

Does this sound like it takes impossibly expensive infrastructure? That's our usual North American thinking, but it's not the only way to look at things. "Sustainable development is not a burden to the economy," explained Pekka Sauri, deputy mayor of Helsinki. He's officially in charge of public works and environmental affairs, and has seen first-hand that green building initiatives are "sexy and lead to all kinds of other benefits."

Reykjavik's Awareness

Reykjavik, Iceland, is the most northerly capital in the world, more than 2,000 kilometres north of Toronto. Like Helsinki, homes and businesses in this city are also connected to district heating systems, a reality that sprang from decisions made by forward-thinking civic leaders way back in 1950. Astonishingly, Reykjavik uses absolutely no fossil fuels for generating heat or electricity.

Legislation also religiously protects groundwater sources to the extent that the entire Reykjavik municipal water supply is pure and safe to drink without any treatment at all. Part of the mentality that makes this astonishing fact possible is instilled in all young people at an early age through a hands-on urban renewal program that began in 1949. Kids by the thousands are taught to plant trees and care for the aesthetics of their city to the extent that the mentality of stewardship is now the fabric of urban culture. This yields many benefits, including things like abundant salmon fishing within city limits, with no health concerns about safely eating even the largest fish.

"We all inhabit the same planet," said Elly Katrin Gudmundsdottir, environment and transport director for Reykjavik. "Some kind of natural green space is never more than a short walk from any location in our city."

Bornholm Island's Goal of Total Sustainability

The year 2006 was a turning point for Bornholm Island, Denmark. Located 37 kilometres off the coast of Sweden, this 500-square-kilometre island was losing economic and social vitality to the point where something needed to be done. Over the last five years, the people of Bornholm have been reinventing their community of 40,000 as a living laboratory of sustainable design. They call this the "Bright Green Island" concept, with the ultimate goal of becoming 100 per cent sustainable in every way by 2025. Bornholm is already virtually 100 per cent carbon neutral right now.

Lene Gronning, director of the Bright Green Test Island, outlined how Bornholm is now a living test lab for manufacturers of sustainable technologies from around the world. If you visited Bornholm last summer, for instance, you would have been offered free use of an electric car as part of the evaluation of an entire vehicle fleet there.

Bornholm has also developed an internationally recognized and ecologically sustainable laundry technology, the world's most advanced biogas plant that produces transportation and heating fuels, and the capacity to generate all its own electric power.

The people of Bornholm have also become world leaders in the training of tradespeople specializing in renovating existing buildings for maximum energy efficiency, and have exported the Bright Green Island concept to four other islands around the world.

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Saddle Up

My father-in-law flew to Copenhagen during winter on business in the early 1980s, and as he left the airport he was astonished to see hundreds of people commuting home in the dark, cold night riding bicycles.

What makes a people do such a sustainable and health-promoting kind of thing?

High fuel prices? The facts don't support this. We pay more for gas now than the Danes did 30 years ago, yet our city roads grow more and more clogged with cars typically carrying just one person.

Is it lack of bike paths? That's part of it, but how come Helsinki has constructed almost 1,200 kilometres of commuter bike paths through an existing city, adding nearly 30 kilometres each year while no place in Canada can match this? Even little Reykjavik builds 10 kilometres of new bike paths annually.

The Big Question

The CanNORD event was long on technical details, but short on answers to one fundamental question: What is it that makes the Nordic heart so committed to beauty, efficiency and environmental sustainability, while the extent of the Canadian vision peters out much beyond the guilt-relieving use of reusable shopping bags?

Political leadership can't be the reason because politicians have very little power to actually lead a people where they don't want to go. No, the issue is about the heart of people, and it leaves me puzzled and sad for Canada.

Perhaps I'm being too pessimistic, and maybe time will make all things right here in our country. But in the meantime, when I think about our Nordic neighbours, I'm left more than a little green, and I don't mean environmentally.

Steve Maxwell, syndicated home improvement and woodworking columnist, has shared his DIY tips, how-to videos and product reviews since 1988.