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## Ecologist proposes a new economy

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As part of maintaining my annually renewed state license to practice architecture, I recently attended a continuing education seminar at the Boston Architectural Center conducted by architect, ecologist, and planner William Reed.

About 130 practicing architects -- mostly middle-aged and older, and many quite accomplished in their own right -- attended the session and were noticeably gripped by Reed's presentation. At times, the group sat absolutely silent and still.

Reed's talk, which he often interrupted to ask probing questions of the audience, was about nothing less than developing an entire mindset with which to approach the world.

Reed described the ways in which the health of our communities and society, the quality of our lives, and the near future of the planet are dependent upon our ability to fashion every aspect of our economy and the built environment in harmony with the operation of the natural world.

In fact, Reed would point out the duality implied in the previous sentence -- the very idea of a manmade world and a natural world co-existing -- and remind us that for all our power we are still but a subset of the ecosystem and not beyond the reach of its laws and principles.

Reed counsels that all of the systems that we have designed to provide ourselves with food, water, warmth, shelter, power, fuel, transportation and recreation must be harmoniously integrated with nature's cycles and processes.

Architects and planners bear a heavy burden in this regard, says Reed, as they participate in the conception and execution of buildings, towns, roads, cities and so much of the infrastructure that organizes life.

Because Reed believes that modern man is increasingly disconnected from nature, and that society is going in the wrong direction in almost every conceivable way, he urges everyone, not just architects, to think about our infrastructure and the entire world in terms of patterns and systems.

He challenges us to be more conscious of the many parts, roles, interconnections and innumerable levels of scale comprising larger patterns. It is individual buildings, neighborhoods, actions, technologies, lifestyles, policies and solutions that create the big patterns that then have the power to affect nature, our health, the quality of life and the possibility of a sound future at all.

Reed asks us to understand the workings of natural ecology, and the workings of our own social-industrial ecology, and compare the two. Do man's practices preserve nature's balance? Are our activities sustainable?

That sort of thinking is fueling the slow movement toward "green" architecture, hybrid cars, and a capitalism that "internalizes" environmental costs. But Reed sees beyond those reforms to more basic questions.

What good is a green grocery store if all the food in it comes from thousands of miles away? If we drive only hybrid cars, can we continue to commute great distances? If we institute carbon "trading" markets, does the existing power grid make sense?

Reed points out fundamental problems in the organization of our economy. Today, we are highly dependent upon far-flung -- often global -- networks for our food, fuel, clothing, products, power and services. This has the effect of increasing our alienation from nature, disconnecting us from the idea of "placeness" and eroding local communities.

Additionally, we can begin to feel powerless to control the direction, shape and larger economic forces of "progress."

Reed has a remedy though, which he labels "restorative" or "regenerative" design. It involves rethinking and remaking our connections with our local communities. It involves stronger regional economies.

Reed would have us overhaul everything. Land development, transportation modes, water use, waste disposal, energy technologies, consumption levels and other particulars of the way we work and live

would be reconceived with sustainability in mind.

Such redevelopment would be healing, Reed says. In fact, regenerative design starts with the question, “Is this project or endeavor good for the planet?”

Reed recognizes the enormity of what he is advocating. But his message resonates effortlessly with people. We know that all things are connected, that nature is maintained with cycles, and that man’s activities are altering the ecosphere.

Reed’s talks aren’t lectures. He says that only you can revise your own mindset. He asks people to observe the world, develop ecological literacy, question assumptions, and think for themselves.

Some people may be tempted to view Reed as an idealistic and impractical dreamer. But they would have it exactly backward. The real dreamers and ideologues are those who perpetuate the status quo and remain unmoved by looming global problems.

If we think of planet Earth as the solar-powered spaceship that it is, its most impractical and irresponsible riders are those who would deplete its resources, foul its life support systems, and sabotage the diversity and balance by which it remains habitable for present and future occupants.

Brian T. Watson, a Salem architect, is a regular contributor to Viewpoint.