

Book review

KITCHEN TABLE SUSTAINABILITY: PRACTICAL RECIPES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH SUSTAINABILITY

Wendy Sarkissian, Nancy Hofer, Yollana Shore, Steph Vajda and Cathy Wilkinson. Earthscan, 2009, ISBN 978-1-84407-614-7, £19.99, 242 pp.

This book is one of the series of five 'community planning' books published by Earthscan in 2008 and 2009 and supported by a community planning website: communityplanning.net.

I am told that 'sustainability' is a word that is no longer *de rigueur* and despite still appearing everywhere has passed out of fashion. Nevertheless, there are still new books that use 'sustainability' in their title. *Kitchen Table Sustainability* has chapters on how sustainability grew as a concept; how, why and when to engage as and with the community as part of the pathway to sustainability; and introduces the eating approach as a means of community engagement in sustainability, which has six facets – education, action, trust, inclusion, nourishment and governance. This book is seen as providing a contribution to translating our intentions into actions.

Despite the interest by many in the profession in 'alternative publications' such as *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* in the 1970s (Pirsig, 1974), *Kitchen Table Sustainability* is not the typical style of book that civil engineers have traditionally used in their professional working life. For many, the apparently homespun philosophy and form of presentation will be off-putting and, I suspect, would mean that they would not even pick the book up if they were to come across it in a bookshop. It does appear from the cover and presentation style to be a book for families and communities who want to get into sustainability, and is clearly written with a 'folksy' style based around the vision of a family seated around the kitchen table, and how many of us manage that nowadays?

It is actually intended for more than this. It is also meant to help practitioners to understand better and engage with those they serve: the public and communities. Notwithstanding the need to engage people with the project planning processes as specified in planning legislation, regulations and in various European directives, many professionals are not very good at this. We professionals are often wary of engagement as it is seen to lead potentially to unrealistic expectations and possibly irreconcilable differences expressed by the most vociferous community members. I urge professional colleagues to suppress their natural revulsion at the (Australian–North American) style of this book and give it a try because, despite the dreadful referencing system that requires several levels of iteration actually to find the reference cited (if it is

there at all, as some are missing), there are some important messages and good guidance in *Kitchen Table Sustainability*.

The kitchen table is used in the book as a metaphor for several things. Among these, it is seen as a focus for getting the community together and also for passing on information. There is a plea that 'we need to listen to each others' stories once again'. Coupled with this is a thesis that we do have many of the tools needed to live more sustainably, developed by dedicated people working in many disparate fields; but we don't yet have the means 'to put the pieces together' (Worldchanging, 2008).

A recent paper in the 25th anniversary edition of *Municipal Engineer* (Chanan *et al.*, 2009) has considered the potential value of municipal–university partnerships in Australia in the research and development process that has some parallels to the message in the book. It is about mutuality and the production of synergistic benefits to all parties involved in a dialogue. In the past many academics, of which I am one, have failed to listen to and support practitioners in their delivery of the vital services that civil engineers provide. Equally, many practitioners in local government and elsewhere have failed to recognise the potential value of working with academics and researchers to mutual benefit.

This book is an example of a growing trend that seeks to bring together multidisciplinary and multi-institutional players into a stronger dialogue that will ultimately help us deal better with the future challenges caused by climate, demographics and lifestyles, and dare I say it, transition towards a more sustainable future. It parallels ongoing studies based on learning alliances (Pacanowsky, 1995), whereby shared groups of cross-functional stakeholders come together to deliver in an area of mutual innovation and also to learn actively as knowledge about future challenges and options unfolds.

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