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Nov 19 2007

[How to Build a Village - inspiration for a better way](#)

Published by [nathan](#) under [Atomisation](#), [Intentional Community](#), [Reviews](#)

*This is the first part of an extensive review of NZ author Claude Lewenz's book **How to Build a Village**. | [Website](#) | [Amazon](#)*

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*And I could write a song a hundred miles long
Well, that's where I belong
And you belong with me. - Chris Martin*

To establish an entire walkable community, with 5,000 to 10,000 people, its own local economy, diverse population, sustainable, is this an idea whose time has finally come? Claude Lewenz invites us to discover that it very well could be.

How to Build a Village is a book with a big idea. And I do mean big - it comes in at 247 large, A4-sized pages, almost all of which contain beautiful colour photographs and diagrams. I hope to present this review as a series of observations, as I read through the major sections of the book.

Unlike many titles proposing solutions to the crises we face, the vast majority of *HTBAV* actually describes the Village vision, rather than bemoaning the problems that it hopes to fix.

Lewenz begins with an executive summary, some personal accounts and an introduction which neatly juxtaposes modern suburbia and its deficiencies with the life of a community able to live more authentically, more humanely. Structurally, aesthetically and socially, the inspirations for *HTBAV* are the old, but very-much-alive, villages of Europe, and especially the walkable plazas and alleys of Italian towns and cities.

He argues as follows: the tight urban village living arrangement began to be lost in the Industrial Revolution, then was all but crushed in the West by Post WWII suburbanisation, but now its time has come again. New technology for communication means that quality of life need not suffer. And the renewed urgency for a more sustainable way of living means that new models are a priority.

Another unique aspect of the book is that Lewenz is quite specific in what he intends. He makes it clear at the beginning that this vision is not strictly an intentional community. He does not have in mind specifically co-housing, or a communal living development, or a tiny eco-village. Rather the Village he describes has a critical mass of population (more than 3,500, less than 10,000), is surprisingly self-contained, and has specific strategies for such issues as maintaining diversity of work, talents and age groups, and preventing gentrification.

Before getting into heavy topic chapters, the needs of specific target groups are addressed in a dozen short "orientation" sections. (eg. "If you are: Parents of a young family, turn to page 22.") These cover just about everyone, from baby boomers worried about retirement to under-

25 adults wanting to get started with a home, to small business owners, the elderly, artists, teachers, architects, farmers and developers.

It is pleasing that *HTBAV* spends some time describing the condition of the elderly and of teenagers, and how suburbia will, and is, ultimately failing them. The spectre of the retiring baby boomers presents itself frequently in the book, with the Village model offered as a solution to the potential wide-scale poverty and institutionalising of the retired and elderly in 15-20 years' time.

It took a little while to become accustomed to the manner in which the Village concept is presented. I found myself constantly asking "but what about", only to find many of my concerns addressed as I read on. There are still many, many what-ifs, but that should be expected with an idea that offers such a dramatically different way of life.

So far, so good. This is a dream that I am convinced deserves to be realised, even if at first it is just an experiment. I only hope it is realised in Australia before NZ (less sheep in the plazas).

Nov 23 2007

[How to Build a Village - the hard sell](#)

*This is the second part of an extensive review of NZ author Claude Lewenz's book **How to Build a Village**. | [Website](#) | [Amazon](#)*

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I have already noted that *HTBAV* spends very little time discussing the problems we face culturally, socially and environmentally. This discussion is pretty much confined to **Chapter 1**, and even here the intent is not to send the reader on a guilt trip over our wasteful lifestyle. It is interesting that the book was started before the sudden rise in awareness about Climate Change, so its emphasis is not "find a solution", but "let's make things better". Those familiar with peak oil films such as Gregory Greene's [The End Of Suburbia](#) will not have difficulty understanding how the atomised suburban way of living was promoted, packaged and sold in North America, Australia, NZ and Canada, and increasingly elsewhere, thanks to cheap and abundant oil and the rise of the automobile.

Chapter 2 at last gives the big vision for how to do it better. If it weren't so delightful and reasonable, it could sound like a brochure! Lewenz paints a warm, beautiful picture of life in a Village, tantalising the reader with dozens of features which will be discussed in the chapters that follow, and leaving out questions for now. The ideas introduced here include diverse pedestrian plazas, *slow food*, a school that uses the village and its surrounds for its classrooms by sharing facilities with specialised Guild Halls, quiet neighbourhood lanes, a stylish social zone for young adults, and different sized homes as middle-age turns to old-age. The book could be accused of rose-coloured glasses here - but it is inspiring.

From here on, the chapters of the book will become specific about layout, architecture, local economy, education, gardens, etc. I hope to review these a few at a time.

Nov 26 2007

[How to Build a Village - laying it out](#)

*This is the third part of an extensive review of NZ author Claude Lewenz's book **How to Build a Village**. | [Website](#) | [Amazon](#) [Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#) | [Part 4](#) | [Part 5](#) | [Part 6](#) | [Part 7](#) | [Conclusion](#) | [\(Reflections\)](#)*

Chapters 3 and 4 of *HTBAV* take a look at the layout of the Village. As someone who spent much of his youth playing computer games with a city-building theme, particularly the more “village-like” simulations (eg. [Pharaoh](#)), I confess to a certain feeling of excitement here. It’s a bit like that feeling of untapped potential when you visit a stationery store and see all that clean, white paper.

The strategies and features suggested in this chapter surprised me at times, though they are adequately backed up, at least in summary form. Lewenz proposes, for example, that the village must have a wall - which could suggest the rise of paranoid, “gated communities”, but a primary purpose of the wall is to prevent sprawl, by keeping a strict separation between the urban area and the rural area beyond.

The Village is envisaged as being based around a series of plazas, with various kinds of pedestrian streets and lanes connecting them. Interestingly, Village planners are advised against most green-spaces within the urban area, in favour of paved plazas with potted plants. Followers of the principles of *permaculture* could make useful contributions here, as having productive plantings in the urban area (such as fruit trees) can go a long way towards making the whole vision more sustainable.

Because one of the purposes of the Village is to be a home for people over many years, great effort must be put into making things interesting, to allow, for example, different walks that residents might take around the entire Village. Diversity and artistry in the plazas themselves, and in the zones that surround them, is vital, thus different moods are suggested for the design of these areas. I imagine that, if a large group of founders were laying out a Village, that the creation of plazas and their zones may be delegated to subgroups.

Noting that a Village is to occupy between 100 and 400 acres, I decided to experiment with Google Earth, and superimposed a 100-acre square of land over a typical, spacious outer-suburban development in Berwick, Victoria.



Note that this is the *minimum* size suggested for a Village, but imagine how much more land area would be available for homes, businesses and common buildings and areas if roads, car parks and garages were not needed inside.

Dec 3 2007

[How to Build a Village - money and food](#)

*This is the fourth part of an extensive review of NZ author Claude Lewenz's book **How to Build a Village**. | [Website](#) | [Amazon](#)*

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Chapters 5 and 6 introduce the issues of local Village economy and food production. Lewenz begins with some basics about the importance of diversity in the local economy, and *money turn* (the amount of times money is used within the village before it is used beyond).

For those with a less-than-optimistic view of Peak Oil and Climate Change, one of the essential questions to ask is whether the Village can make itself mostly independent of the larger economy of the nation, in the event of severe recession or depression, and this is indeed one of the three economic conditions discussed, for which the Village must be planned. It is a core principle of the project that local food production be part of the economy of the Village. The whole system is to be designed to be far less fossil-fuel dependent than a suburban development. Again, though, the book chooses to emphasise the benefits and quality of locally grown food, eaten in a relaxed, slow setting.

Lewenz suggests that much of the construction of the Village itself should be local, and made from local, quality materials. This introduced a problem for me, which I don't believe was fully addressed. Given the scale of construction, I imagine a local construction industry at the Village site would have to be massive to accomplish the task in a reasonable timeframe, so that the first residents were not living with dust and noise for the best part of a decade! Perhaps a staged development would not be a terrible idea, even though it would mean the whole concept could not be realised at once.

A number of other industries are discussed, including manufacturing (carpentry, textiles), tertiary education, local services and shops, and local banking.

Of particular interest is the introduction to the concept of a Visitor Industry, as opposed to a Tourist Industry. Being a very unique location in a country like Australia or NZ, and having interesting cultural aspects and unique local products, a Village is likely to attract many people. How these visitors are catered for can have very positive or very negative results on the local community. Lewenz suggests that the Village needs to attract visitors, people who will stay for more extended periods, and not just during tourist seasons.

Dec 06 2007

[How to Build a Village - transport and energy](#)

*This is the fifth part of an extensive review of NZ author Claude Lewenz's book **How to Build a Village**. | [Website](#) | [Amazon](#)*

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Serious questions must now be asked about sustainability. How environmentally sustainable is the Village concept? What are the priorities, in terms of transport and renewable energy? **Chapters 7 and 8** begin to answer these questions in more detail.

There is but one hard-and-fast rule within the Village walls, the only rule that cannot be debated when the village is formed: *Cars are banned*. That is, anything larger than a golf buggy, and anything that doesn't run on electric or a clean source of energy, and anything over a certain speed, cannot pass beyond the motorpool at the Village edge. There will be no negotiations on this point. Lewenz provides example after example of how the automobile cannot be domesticated, how it invariably ruins the purpose of human-scale design and architecture, and hence diminishes the communities into which it is brought.

What about ambulances, garbage trucks, fire engines? While there are other ways of reducing the demand for the latter two, the Village equips itself with smaller vehicles for these purposes. Again Lewenz points to the Italian example, with golf-cart-sized plug-in vehicles,

which could even be made for hire around the Village, particularly when elderly or infirm residents need to make a cross-town journey.

It is hard to overstate my satisfaction with the walkable community principle. Lewenz confesses to be a car-lover, but I have become less and less enamoured of these wonderful toys, and I haven't had one of my own for seven years (but that's a story for another post!). A colleague of mine once referred to Australians' obsession as the Car God. We are aware of what they do to a community, how they isolate us while promising to make us "closer", the damage they do to the environment (especially during their manufacture), how they increase our dependence on unstable, often aggressive, nations and on a particular energy resource whose supply is now widely accepted to be in decline (or "plateauing"), how they clog up our inner-city streets, how clearly they contribute to our obesity epidemic*, and the incredible toll of injury and death they bring each year. Still our state governments continue to plan and build freeways and road tunnels. The source of our passion for these vehicles is something much more than an eye for practicality.

As for energy, it is easy to imagine the opportunities for a Village community to invest in shared renewable energy infrastructure such as roof-top solar PV and wind turbines. But *HTBAV* goes further, placing the possible procedures for water, energy and waste within the framework of a comprehensive plan, the kind that is needed to gain permission for the development of a typical suburban subdivision.

Among the ideas that could be considered; Sustainable and surprisingly low-odour methods of sewerage treatment, separate pipes for fresh water, greywater and blackwater, food boxes to reduce packaging, a zero-waste principle (read this section before pooh-poohing), and recycling.

To summarise this section, it is worth considering what we might end up with if Western cities like Melbourne have to be forced in painful steps towards sustainability, either by International carbon agreements or by the unforgiving hand of nature itself. Will we wait until our massive, spread-out suburbs are full of dysfunctional make-shift homesteads or squalid slums coursed by fleets of buses, running on biofuels grown in South-East Asia instead of food crops, or where Orang-utans once had their homes?

*One in five Australians don't even take one 10-minute walk per week. Half are not getting the minimum level of exercise needed.

Dec 8, 2007

[How to Build a Village - schools and governance](#)

*This is the sixth part of an extensive review of NZ author Claude Lewenz's book **How to Build a Village**. | [Website](#) | [Amazon](#)*

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The whole of **Chapter 9** of *HTBAV* is devoted to how schools might work in the Village. My current career is in teaching, and I have a particular interest in the difficulties faced by our educational institutions in today's suburban culture. Lewenz himself has a lot of experience in this field, holding a Master's degree in Educational Administration.

With a population between 5000 and 10000, a Village which properly represents a cross-section of Australia would have between 1000 and 2000 school-age residents, enough for at least one secondary school and at least two primary feeder schools.

Essentially, the Village is seen as an opportunity to do school very differently, from the principles that define it, to who controls it, to its management and structure. One of the most intriguing ideas in the book is to do away with single-use classrooms, instead using adaptable rooms in other buildings around the Village, such as rooms in the Artists' Guild, Library, Music Guild, Writer's Guild, even at a Greenhouse. As Lewenz puts it, the Village *is* the classroom.

Each Village is envisioned as a safe place for children, not because they are locked up in rooms, but because the plazas are places of activity, where people can work and keep an eye on children as they play. There is much that can be discussed about this. I believe the issue of protecting children from malevolent adults is one that will continue to raise its head during the promotion of the Village concept. If a Village were developed, and then sadly experienced a number of such issues, it could set back the concept greatly. In just about every school in Australia, for example, teachers are required to wear name tags at all times, and this is in a closed environment. Perhaps the Village concept will help to treat the cause of many of these problems, rather than just addressing the symptoms. I imagine some parents will choose to join a Village with their families, others may not.

Chapter 10 is the last of the topic-based sections, and discusses ways in which the Village could be governed, such as how to maintain accountability to the residents, and how to deal with major and minor conflicts.

Dec 8 2007

[How to Build a Village - steps for making it happen](#)

*This is the seventh part of an extensive review of NZ author Claude Lewenz's book **How to Build a Village**. | [Website](#) | [Amazon](#)*

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From this point on, *HTBAV* begins to outline a more step-by-step process of how a group of people might go about designing a Village, and to suggest certain codes - principles and rules - that will help to define it.

It's important to note another way in which the Village concept differs from a typical suburban development - the process involves not just developers, government and other advisers, but a large group of people (perhaps up to 100) who are committed to living there. Through formal and informal collaboration methods, these Founders participate very actively in making the whole thing happen, in the decisions that will define the structure and liveability of the Village. In this way, it is intended that the Village assume a form which is authentic.

In **Chapter 11**, Lewenz takes the reader through this rigorous process of first choosing the land, the use of Pattern Cards to keep track of Village principles and features, then proceeding with the development of a large scale model and the creation of overlay maps (eg. noise map, odour map, accessibility map). Once again, sustainability and quality of life are prime concerns.

Chapter 12's sample list of design codes provides a starting point for the Founders to work from, and shows how the concepts discussed in the previous chapters can be summarised, codified and used not only for the construction of the Village, but for its life.

There is also a brief comment on the question of how to retrofit an existing suburb, that is, how to convert an existing suburban development into a Village. This question itself could probably be the subject of a book.

The final chapters of *HTBAV* delve into architectural principles and building techniques, as well as a very interesting small philosophical essay [something to comment on in another post perhaps].

Dec 11 2007

[How to Build a Village - conclusion](#)

*This is the conclusion of an extensive review of NZ author Claude Lewenz's book **How to Build a Village**. | [Website](#) | [Amazon](#)*

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It is difficult to conclude a review of a book like *HTBAV* without recommending it for anyone with an interest in sustainability, or just living in a way that is, at once, innovative and time-tested.

Buy the book from the Amazon link above, or use the Website link to read more about it.

We stand at a point in history which is frightening. Each day the news seems to be more grim, but there seems so little action. So it is refreshing to read something which proposes a dramatic change in lifestyle, not just fluorescent light bulbs and water tanks. *HTBAV* does not promise utopia, but it is an answer to the desolation of suburbia. And it's not something that can't be done.

Today we lived a thousand years. All we have is now. - **Live**

(BTW, feel free to contact me on this blog if you want to chat about doing it, and you live in Australia.)

Dec 14, 2007

[How to Build a Village - reflections from a Christian perspective](#)

*This is an addendum to an extensive review of NZ author Claude Lewenz's book **How to Build a Village**. | [Website](#) | [Amazon](#)*

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Over the past few weeks, I've had the opportunity to engage in a number of conversations with friends and workmates about Lewenz's Village concept. I want to outline some thoughts and concerns which might come up, when looking at it from a Kingdom perspective.

Sustainability and Utopia

A primary purpose of this blog is to explore how important sustainable living is to an authentic life following Christ. I make no secret of what I believe - that many Christians in the developed

world are either asleep at the wheel, or knowingly refusing to acknowledge that our hands are “full of blood” (Isaiah 1), and to respond to the call to give up even some of our trinkets and begin to take responsibility for the effect of the exorbitant lifestyles we live. And then we wonder why fewer and fewer people seem to be interested in our Message! The Message is not at fault.

At the same time, we know that a plan based *only* on human ingenuity, human faithfulness and human trust will never fully arrive. It is important to remember this, lest a Village development become an idol, an end in itself. There will be no utopia on earth if only Man reigns in it. Inasmuch as the Village can help us to live more faithfully to God, more sustainably, with more love for each other and for this world, that is worship! But it is not our efforts alone which bring the Kingdom to earth, and which will ultimately bring the Kingdom in all its fullness. It is Christ Himself, His body broken for us, His blood poured out. His Spirit empowers us to live lives that give God glory. We must remember Who we live for.

Welfare and Exclusivity

Probably the most serious criticism I can see for the Village concept, as presented in *HTBAV*, is its apparent exclusiveness. While the suggested ideas of parallel real estate deserve some attention, it *seems* that, unless specific measures are taken, the first Villages at least will be filled with intelligentsia, people who are reasonably well-off. Perhaps I am reading it wrong, and this is not necessarily how things would pan out, but this is the impression given by the book.

Will state-funded housing be able to be incorporated into a Village? How would this be accomplished? Could churches and charities play a role here?

Scalability

How ultimately scalable is the Village concept? That is, will it work for the majority of people in developed nations? This must be able to be achieved if the Village is to offer a solution for sustainability.

Certainly, first world economies have a growing number of telecommuters, but in the end, many people, often people not so well-off, must work in large factories producing electronics and other goods still required even in Villages.

Many suburbs will be extremely difficult to retrofit as Villages, and they will not fit the ideal model of a tight urban core with arable land surrounding it. This is another challenge.

How to “do church” in a Village

This is a fascinating question, and it depends on the more fundamental one of what church will *be* in 20 years' time. Of course there are many factors here, not the least of which is the level of practical faith among believers, but from the outside:

- With the exception of immigrants to Australia, the traditional parish church model tends to be failing in modern cities and suburbs.
- The highly *attractional* model, synonymous with Sydney's Hillsong church, appears to attract a particular (limited) demographic within Australian society, but even much of the growth here is really churn - people swapping from other churches.

Would either of these models have more success in a Village? I believe one of the reasons the church has suffered is because of the disappearance of authentic Christian community. Not a problem with any system or model particularly, but with the very heart of discipleship that should characterise Christians. Our capitulation to the spirit of hyper-individualism and consumerism in the West, coupled with the suburban living arrangement, is destroying the church.

The parish model was developed in an era of topographical proximity and general widespread Christendom, both of which have been lost since the rise of suburbia, but it may work better in a tight, walkable urban structure, if believers are *more* generous, *more* willing to bear one another's burdens and *more* loving, both within and without the church.

The attractional model is, I believe, born of the suburban era, and may not have much of a future, though the really spiritual, faithful aspects of it will, such as the opening up of emotive freedom-focussed praise.

Another way which may be opened to Christians in a Village is the minster model. In times past, this meant a church or cathedral attached to a monastery. Often monasteries are associated with isolation and rigid asceticism, but I'm trying to imagine something more like a Cohousing community within the larger Village, whose role is not only to evangelise or offer a church service to the public, but also to directly and commonly serve the poor and those in need, or to perform other vital functions within the Village. Perhaps these neo-monastics wouldn't need to form a single-gender group. Perhaps they wouldn't even need to be celibate and unmarried.

Whatever Christians do, we cannot afford to miss out on being part of a Village. If it is a better lifestyle, one that glorifies God, one that honours His people and His Creation, then that is reason enough. A community like this should not be without an example of faithful disciples of Christ.