

**THE LANGUAGE OF GREEN IS
UNIVERSAL...OR IS IT?
WorldChanging Team**

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"Beyond the Tipping Point" was the track I followed throughout the weekend at [West Coast Green](#) (the others were Planning Design & Development; EEBA Houses that Work; The Business of Building; Homes & Our Health; Green Policy & Programs; Building Science; and Spirit of Place). I'm not sure whether or not this influenced the high rate of the phrase "tipping point" being used but I heard it in every session and keynote I attended (including Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s powerful and erudite keynote). A couple of the speakers cited the number of registered conference attendees (about 8,000) as evidence of this conference being the tipping point for the public's interest in sustainability. True to its track, the speakers also cited examples of how, well, we've gone beyond that point and are already experiencing a different kind of climate change – one that is more hospitable to adopting green practices.

On Friday, I came in a little late to Ray Cole's "Building New Expectations: Zero Energy Housing" but arrived in time to see his example of how – as he said it – "we can't legislate our way into change" when it comes to human interaction with the natural and built environments. The slide on the screen was an aerial view of a street with a traffic roundabout that had been installed in order to slow down drivers. The photo showed how drivers drove around the barrier and over the grass in order to maintain their speed. Cole used this photo to tell a story, something he returned to again and again throughout his presentation – that new ways need to be developed to tell stories and communicate information about sustainable practices.

Cole also suggested the need for establishing a common language about sustainability across industries and questioned the potency of terms like "ecological footprint," "carbon neutral," and "zero energy" when it comes to marketing and the public's perception of what those terms mean. "You hardly hear the word 'conservation' in contemporary debates," Cole pointed out. You also don't hear "preservation," "protection," and "reclamation," words I heard a lot growing up in an environmentally-conscious household. What the conference demonstrated more than anything is the high currency of "green" as a codeword for sustainable practices across industries and the high number of green-named businesses (green*light, Green Builder, Green Building Pages, Green-e, Green Festival, Built Green, etc.) indicate that they trust the customer knows what green means.

After a coffee break (organic and out of a biodegradable cup, naturally), I returned to the main auditorium to hear a conversation between [Sim Van der Ryn](#) (author, Ecological Design) and [Tim Owen-Kennedy](#) (President, Vital Systems). Van der Ryn was in fine form and, from what I gathered from Owen-Kennedy's introduction, his typical acerbic self. Midway through the conversation Van der Ryn said to the

audience, "Those of you who are younger than me have a challenging job ahead of you – to redesign the world we live in. So... good luck." He wasn't kidding either. The general mood of the conference is a call for paradigm shifts in every area. Both Van der Ryn and Cole came back again and again to the same idea: that the built environment can no longer be addressed separate from values, ethics, emotions, and language. Similar to Cole's recommendation, Van der Ryn also talked about how new metaphors are needed in terms of how we talk about sustainability.

The conference also underscored how the current environmental movement is now framed as a consumerist's movement. Considering the context this was no surprise, it was a tradeshow after all. But on Saturday after hearing conference host Donald Sims say "Your vote in elections is one thing but your biggest vote is where you put your money" and Hunter Lovins (Founder & President, Natural Capitalism, Inc. and co-author of Natural Capitalism) praise Wal-Mart's entry into the green market, I began to wonder how the movement can ask for a wholesale paradigm shift and continue to promote the current economic structure in the same breath.

Near the end of the day Saturday, I sat in on Robyn Griggs Lawrence (editor-in-chief, Natural Home Magazine) talk "Green Goes Mainstream." Griggs Lawrence was struck by something she saw in Harper's about the lack of environmental concern in the hip hop community, and she used that to draw comparisons between the rise and eventual commodification of hip hop to the current status of the green movement.

Although this pairing wasn't entirely successful (there were a few glaring oversights in her history of hip hop), it did point out something missing from every other talk I attended: 8,000 people who can afford the \$475 to attend the entire conference does not necessarily signify a tipping point. In other words, as Griggs Lawrence pointed out, "To say green goes mainstream may be a little bit arrogant." There's a lot of good news in green but her point is well taken. Sustainability as a point of cultural identification doesn't yet come close to infusing the number and diversity of populations that hip hop does. Homeowners and builders are adopting in full force -- which makes a tremendously positive impact -- but what will it take to make green the new hip hop?

Posted by WorldChanging Team at October 2, 2006 10:05 PM | [TrackBack](#)