J. Gary Lawrence
Abstract for AIA Colorado

The Problem of Conventional Wisdom

The issues our society faces today are highly technical. Climate change is an accepted reality, although the specific consequences are still unknown. We are struggling to manage dwindling water supplies, over-used electrical generation systems, rapid urbanization and re-urbanization, and demographic shifts. Our engineering expertise can easily seduce us into believing that solutions lie only in the scientific aspects of projects. Danger lies at the end of this path.

The requirements of people, now and in the future, demand that we completely integrate not only aesthetic and scientific factors – but the real needs and desires of people: their senses, their emotions, their diverse identities too.

The drive for rationality may be the greatest barrier to communicating with audiences who think emotionally. As designers we have a tendency to believe that audience members who do not take our design sensibilities seriously, who do not appear to care about environmental concerns, are either evil, stupid or both. Regardless of the audience's education, level of interest or stake in the issue, it is not their responsibility to understand us. It is our responsibility to make ourselves understood.

If we are to successfully implement sustainable solutions with the goal of optimizing conditions for human development over time, we must develop a more thoughtful approach to communicating our goals, objectives and responses. We must view the issues through the stakeholders' eyes, looking out, rather than through our eyes, looking in.

Working with communities to try and help them figure out what to do today to get the future they want tomorrow, there are always barriers. Some of the barriers have to do with information about the present and probable futures. Some are about our views about other people's motives and nature. There are always ideological differences complicating the discussions. Memory is both a blessing and a curse.

Gary's talk will draw upon the Drivers of Change research to illustrate the sources of conflict that shape the choices stakeholders make on the path to sustainability. Recognizing that sustainability is a political choice, not simply a technical solution, we must embrace a new design paradigm wholeheartedly, efficiently and rapidly, if we are to effectively manage the complexity of the issues impeding progress toward the ultimate goal: optimizing conditions for sustained human development over an extended period of time.