



The Noisette Vision of Sustainable Development:

A Greenprints Interview with Master Speaker John Knott

John Knott is CEO and Managing Director of Dewees Island, a progressive sustainable coastal development. He specializes in ecologically sound and energy-efficient design and is considered one of the most versatile, environmentally innovative builders and developers in the industry. Noisette, his latest project, is located in North Charleston and will be the largest urban redevelopment project in the U.S. with an emphasis on long-term sustainability.

Q- What is your sustainable development philosophy?

The concept is that sustainability is in essence a partnership, whether it's at the economic, social, ecological or institutional level. For instance, schools are in the transportation business, but we have no public transit. What happens if those school buses, which exist for seven hours a day, suddenly shift to an eighteen-hour day operation? They're a neighborhood bus and they're a clean-fueled bus.

Again it's aligning interest. We have all these different capital investments being made. If you're going to talk about sustainability you've got to start looking at where capital resources are going at all levels. We have to find the value in each separate group and figure out how to communicate with each other and build a level of trust. The only way it's ever going to work is if education is seen as a cultural priority. I think that we have to get to a point where we truly believe in the value of every human being and the wisdom and contribution that everyone can give us, whether they come from poor or rich, black or white, corporate, environmental or public sectors.

Q- What have been the real challenges and successes with Noisette?

Number one, we're not out of the ground! We're in the planning process. We've been at it for about four years in emerging the concept and building the relationship with the city. I think that one of the real successes has been the community involvement model. This location is an existing urban area, with lots of people living there. They

basically run from a low- to middle-income level, are ethnically diverse, with thirty-two percent home ownership. We've met with over 2,000 residents who have gone from a level of skepticism and disbelief, to a level of understanding, belief and real energy.

When you're working to turn around a city, most leaders need to understand that the developers and mayors can't turn a city around - the people themselves have to do it. So, the first thing they have to believe in is the value of their own place - their neighborhoods and its history. We've been able to give them a real sense of the richness of that history and what this area has contributed in terms of people, industry, ecosystems, environment, culture and the arts, much of which had been forgotten. That history has empowered them to really want to be there and want to stay.

So the breadth of a concept as a holistic, sustainable redevelopment of a city is one thing to think it, but to then communicate it in a way that doesn't scare people is very difficult. The alignment of interest would be the next one. We're doing well, but it's a long road. In bringing together all these normally segregated groups, we've got to find a way in which interest is aligned and is beneficial. People don't buy products or services, they buy benefits. Whether you're volunteering your time or you're a political person making a decision on legislation, each decision you make is a purchased decision and what you're doing is purchasing a benefit. So you've got to identify what the entity desires and how the benefits will enrich their

lives, whether it be socially, politically, economically or culturally.

The community organization and commercial organization social processes are what we're hugely immersed in right now, and it certainly is one of the major challenges of trying to embark on this kind of endeavor. This is the largest sustainable initiative in the country, if not the world, and certainly one of the largest urban initiatives ever undertaken. It addresses all of the agenda issues that everyone's talking about as one holistic effort. This is the first time in a real urban low- to middle-income setting that we will address every use-type, every economic level, and rebuild infrastructure with a city mayor and city council fully committed to creating a sustainable city. You can't get much better than that.

Q- What sparked the idea of redeveloping Noisette?

The only criticism of Dewees Island is that it's upper income. So we created a vision of Dewees in the city, to take the same principles to every economic level and create a sustainable place that was fully integrated and mixed use.

We started in the city of Charleston for a year and then we were invited by the city of North Charleston to look at their city. It's the 3,000-acre area of the old city, the existing old city center and the closed navy base. It's probably about twenty percent of the population of the city and maybe about seven percent of its landmass. It grew from a five-square-block concept and kept growing. The logic of it became very apparent and the city really wanted to do it.

And it would have never happened without Dewees. Dewees created the data site to prove that you could make money and make sense out of sustainability and green building, and that you didn't have to chew wild berries, eat tree limbs and wear Birkenstocks! It also showed that you could trust our development group. We will not only do what we say, but do more than we say, and that we're serious about being very aggressive in our relationship with the environment and figuring out how to live in balance with our natural systems.

I am a community developer serving the five basic human needs of the community that we are developing or redeveloping. We're in the human habitat business. We're in the human community business. That drives us in a very different way. We're not into sticks and bricks. We're not in land development. That certainly is a tool we use, but that's not what our business is.

Part of what I am trying to do is shift the ground on which people think they are standing, so that they think more about the human community. Every action they take and every decision they make has the power to either enhance or detract from their lives. When we get to the point where we all understand that's what we are about, then all the other stuff will change.

Q- Do you think that's happening?

I think we all have a long way, including me. We are products of our culture. All of us came to Dewees, unless we live there full time, from being someplace else which is a totally different way of living. I think we have to

recognize that all of us are on a journey, all of us are on the path, none of us has arrived. The most sustainable thing that has ever been done in this country is only one percent of where we ought to be.

Q- What are the benefits of sustainability?

When we are talking about sustainability, the benefit that we are delivering is health, durability, efficiency and comfort for the occupants and the larger community. Those benefits go to the human participants as well as the ecology. If we do think sustainably, the ecology is durable. It's more efficient in its operation as a system, much more comfortable for us to build in and it's very healthy. If that's working on the human side, our buildings are much more durable, more efficient, last longer, have lower maintenance costs, they're healthy because we don't have the indoor air quality problems. They are comfortable because of all that. We have to stop trying to sell sustainability and "green" because it isn't that people don't want it, it's that they are benefits of them.

For more information, visit www.deweesisland.com.