

# EcoEDGE 2

More than half the world now lives in urban environments. What does this mean for building sustainable cities? What are the opportunities and responsibilities for Australia? Ceridwen Owen reports on EcoEdge 2.

The EcoEdge 2 Conference, held at Federation Square in Melbourne in February, was the sixth in a series of forums hosted by the City of Melbourne to explore the critical issues in the design of the contemporary metropolis. The specific theme for this year's conference, "the urgent design challenge in building sustainable cities", reflects a recent watershed event. For the first time in history, more than half of the world's population now lives in urban areas.

The 450 delegates, primarily architects, urban planners and state and local government representatives, gathered together over three days to hear a range of local, interstate and international speakers on the sub-themes of green government, green urbanism and green buildings. Presentations varied widely, from the abstract and theoretical to the concrete and particular, and from the scale of the shack to the Chinese megapolis.

Not surprisingly, given the theme for this year's conference, several presentations examined the unprecedented scale and speed of urbanization in China. To my mind, the most interesting and thought-provoking take on the China situation came from Neville Mars, Director of the Dynamic City Foundation in Beijing. Addressing the

socio-cultural as well as the more frequently discussed physical challenges of an urbanizing China, Neville Mars prompted consideration of the move from the "collective dream" of communism to the "scattered dream" of the market. With a government goal to build 400 new cities of one million inhabitants each by 2020, equivalent to the construction of Europe within the next twenty years, how can these new dreams take shape in the mind before they become a physical reality?

The physical patterns that are emerging in the contemporary Chinese city were challenged by several of the presenters who are actively engaged in designing vast precincts within these new urban centres. Urban density (or lack of it) was a particular concern. As Peter Davidson of Lab Architecture Studio pointed out, it is the literal interpretation of the "green city" that is leading to a sprawling urban suburbia with twenty-five percent site coverage. At the same time, Davidson questioned the apparent disparity between Chinese conceptions of holism in relation to the body and the application of mono-functional thinking in the design of the urban realm.